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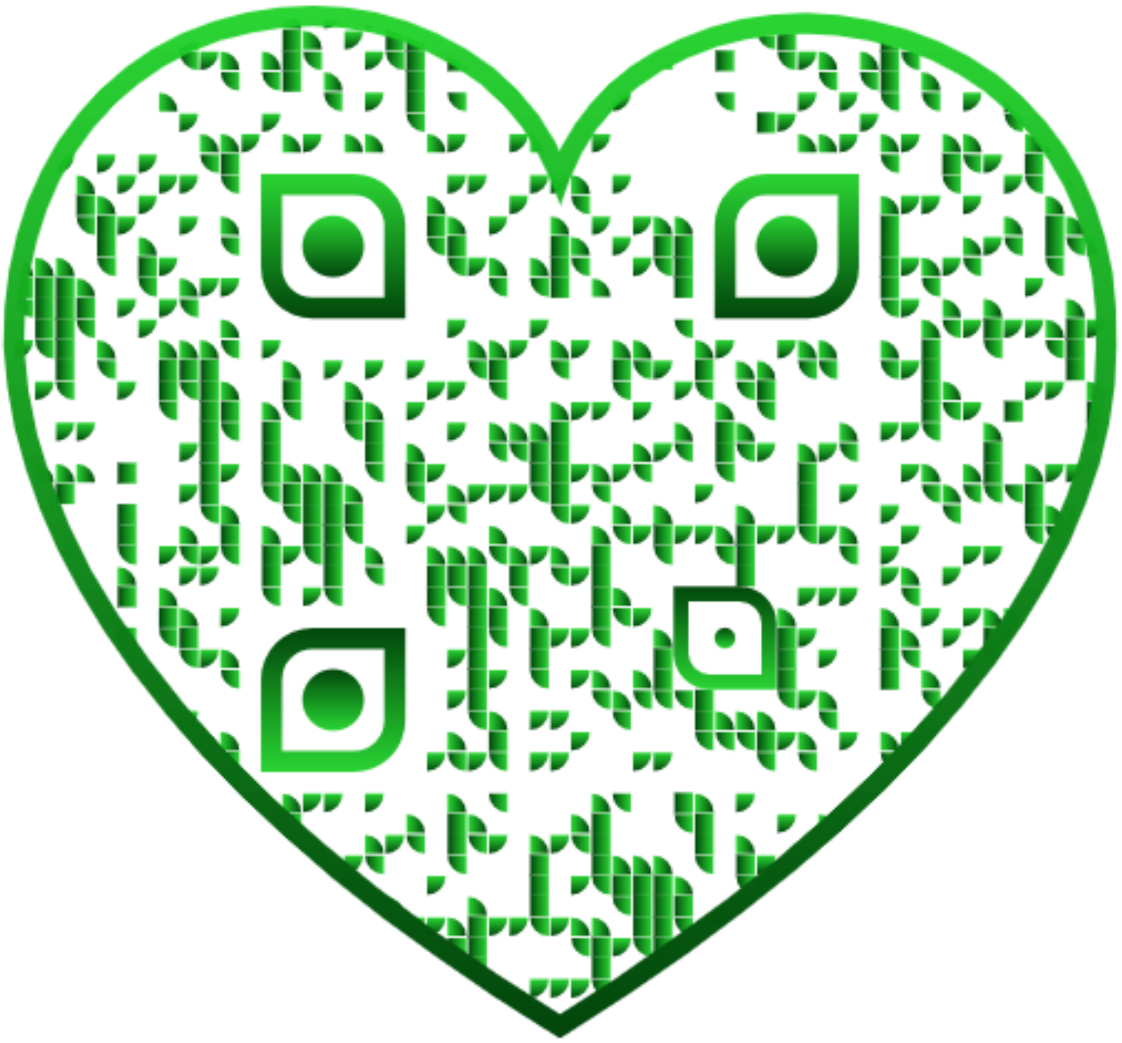
ARJUN KANUNGO
HAS A GRAND PLAN



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Correspondence

+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE

"His [KING's] blend of innovation and tradition pushes boundaries, inspiring artists and listeners alike."

— Roshan Noronha

KING Is a Beacon for Future Creativity

The April 2024 cover story on KING's futuristic approach to music resonated deeply. His blend of innovation and tradition pushes boundaries, inspiring artists and listeners alike. As we navigate a rapidly evolving musical landscape, KING's vision serves as a guiding light, ushering us into a promising future of creativity and expression.

SPOTLIGHT

Tejas' Fusion of Indie-Rock and Indian Influences

Tejas' new EP 'Museum' offers a captivating sonic journey. Its fusion of indie-rock with Indian influences is refreshing, showcasing Tejas' versatility and artistry. The record invites exploration into his rich musical world, enticing listeners with its infectious rhythms and emotive storytelling.

- **Shreya Naik**

Swarathma Makes a Triumphant Return

Swarathma's return with new music after three years is a momentous occasion for fans. Their unique blend of folk and rock captivates audiences, and anticipation for their latest release is palpable. As they embark on this musical journey once again, listeners eagerly await the magic they're known to conjure.

- **Pratik Gawade**

Anand Bhaskar Delves into the Art of TV Soundtracks

Anand Bhaskar's interview about composing the soundtrack for the Hotstar series 'Showtime' sheds light on the intricate process behind crafting music for television. His insights into blending genres and creating emotional resonance through sound offer a deeper appreciation for the artistry that enriches our viewing experiences.

- **Shlok Pande**

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Opening Act

Cozy, Classic Pop

LAUFEY MAKES MUSIC that bridges generations, offering up lovesick modern-pop lyricism amid sounds that recall Ella Fitzgerald and Chet Baker. Fresh off a Best Traditional Pop Vocal Album win for her second LP, *Bewitched,* at the Grammys — "One of the best moments of my life," she says — the Icelandic Chinese multi-instrumentalist and singer is just getting started. "I have to live to write, it goes hand in hand," says Laufey, 25. She's at her most creative in a warm, comfortable environment: "It's all about having instruments that I connect with. I really need natural light as well, and I love having books around me." The songs she writes this way have rapidly given her a fiercely loyal fan base. "My songs are like my journals," she says. "And when other people relate to the music, I'm like, 'Oh, thank God I'm not alone.'" LEAH LU

Laufey rehearsing in Los Angeles in January

PHOTOGRAPH BY Magnus Unnar

The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

The Highs and Lows of Girl in Red

The super-relatable pop singer from Norway is ready for her close-up after touring with Taylor

→

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Thea Traff

GIRL IN RED

Marie Ulven is not a chill person. Over the course of lunch at a slick New York spot packed with women in expensive-looking black athleisure, she swings between aping Taylor Swift's arm flex on "The Man" from the Eras Tour — a move that Ulven, who opened for a few of those dates last summer, knows all about — and clutching her chest, breathless. "I'm just trying to deal with my anxiety when it comes," she says. "Right now, my heart really hurts."

Ulven's not having a heart attack, thank God. Sometimes, the Norwegian artist known as Girl in Red can just get a little overwhelmed. And with good reason. Today, no one at this swish eatery recognizes the young woman in the blue Ralph Lauren sweater and L.A. Dodgers cap, but with a Swift stadium tour under her belt and a new record, *I'm Doing It Again Baby!*, in the offing, that could very well be about to change. As her creative director and longtime friend Isak Jenssen tells me: "She switches between being the most confident person I know to being very insecure. At one point, she didn't think she had the biggest potential, like Taylor or Billie. But now, I think, she realizes she does."

Ulven, 25, has pretty much always taken music seriously — she's a true workhorse, like those superstars. The Oslo resident started writing songs when she was eight, playing guitar at 14, and has been producing her own music for a decade. After uploading her first song, the sad-and-sweet "I Wanna Be Your Girlfriend," to YouTube in 2018, things started moving very fast for the then-teen. She dropped two EPs in 2018 and 2019, followed by her debut album, *If I Could Make It Go Quiet,* in 2021. A poppy therapy session of a record that dealt with everything from macabre intrusive thoughts to the indignity of being a fuck buddy, the LP cemented Ulven's place in a weird-girl pop canon that includes the likes of Olivia Rodrigo and Gayle. She's relatable, but not cliché.

If three years seems a bit of a long time between albums for a budding artist, Ulven not only agrees with you, she's already worried about everything else she hasn't done yet: headlining her own arena tours, buying a midcentury pied-à-terre in Los Angeles, and, oh God, turning 30. "I need to learn to smell the fucking roses," she says, debating whether to just eat her Caesar salad with her hands — the giant leaves are unwieldy — or use a fork. Opting for the former, she adds: "I saw this TikTok about how we're the only species on the planet, humans, that are never satisfied. We set a goal and we really chase that fucking goal. And then we achieve it, and then we're like, 'What's next? What's next?' There's something really depressing about it."

In the end, Ulven went back to the studio when she was ready — when she had her fill of experiences to translate into music. "I'm inspired by paper and folders and fonts and light," she says, crunching into a crouton. "I'm inspired by espressos and traveling and trains. I'm inspired by waiters having etiquette. How he pours wine very nicely and lets you smell it first. I'm inspired by absolutely everything."

One big inspiration these days is her girlfriend, whom Ulven met at an Oslo bar in 2021 after deciding to just say yes to life instead of hiding on her couch. The night they met went on and on, Ulven says, culminating at the beach where they hung out under the stars with her dog. "Prior to meeting my girlfriend, I was very much convinced that I was unlovable, and I really hated myself," she says. "I never realized that it actually can really tear you down to be hating yourself so much." That experience is immortalized on her new album with the swoony "A Night to Remember," studded with lush keys that flutter like your heart does when you start falling in love.

As per usual, Ulven plays nearly every instrument on the album, which she recorded across a handful of European studios and her Oslo apartment. But this time, her signature brand of bedroom pop is polished to a high gloss that she's only slightly worried fans will find off-putting. "I feel like I'm a completely different person," she says. "So the music on this album, for me, doesn't sound so different from what I've done before. It just sounds like exactly what I'd make right now."

In her classic fashion, the album ping-pongs between highs and lows. Opener "I'm Back" creeps in almost bashfully, with Ulven proclaiming: "I'm back, I feel like myself/I was gone for a minute/'Cause I went to get help." The switch flips with "Doing It Again Baby," a bombastic strut of a song, and the first one she wrote for the record after compulsively picking out the melody during soundchecks. "That song is about feeling like I have so much self-esteem that I feel like I'm a cocky-ass bitch walking down the streets with my sunglasses on," she says.

Still, the bravado isn't a constant — single "Too Much" is about being just that (her mom was always telling her to quiet down), while tracks like "Phantom Pain" and "Pick Me" remind us that Ulven wasn't always so lucky in love. Sabrina Carpenter does help her go scorched-earth on an ex, though, on "You Need Me Now." The two singers both gained big new audiences last year as openers on separate legs of Swift's Eras Tour, but they've been friends since around 2022 — Ulven says they formed a mutual-appreciation society in each other's DMs before she asked Carpenter to guest on the dark rocker of a track for her new album.

"When she reached out to me, it felt like a no-brainer and I was immediately drawn to the record," Carpenter says. "It was exciting to make because it pushed me into new sonic territory."

Ulven is perhaps most herself on the ominous, echoey "Ugly Side," in which she grapples with feeling like Jeykll and Hyde — torn between being "cute" and "lovable" and "boiling inside."

In a lot of ways, she's always existing between dichotomies, whether that means feeling distinctly uncomfortable attending New York Fashion Week shows by hip designers like Tory Burch, Khaite, and Eckhaus Latta while she's in town ("I'm a very basic girl when it comes to clothes," she says) or proclaiming on her album's title track: "My big fat ego is making me say/This '99 vintage has impeccable taste!"

"I have these incredible highs, and then I have these very low lows," Ulven says as the waiter whisks away our plates. "Maybe that's good. I don't want to be just one thing. I don't want to be just this confident person who never doubts themselves. I think doubt can be great as much as it can be very paralyzing."

She pauses for a moment. "Yeah. I just need to chill the fuck out.... I think that's exactly what I need to do." There's a first time for everything. BRENNA EHRLICH

FAST FACTS

SWIFT THINKING
On the Eras Tour, Ulven says, she and Taylor Swift chatted about the challenges of making a second album and writing from perspectives other than your own.

ART POP
The cover of her new album is a massive sculpture that she commissioned in Oslo.

YES, CHEF
She's a big fan of *The Bear* and star Jeremy Allen White.

GROOMING BY MELISSA DEZARATE AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING KEVIN MURPHY AND DR. STURM. STYLING BY LUCY GASTON. PREVIOUS PAGE: JACKET BY SAINT LAURENT BY ANTHONY VACCARELLO. SHIRT BY ACNE STUDIOS. THIS PAGE: OUTFIT BY CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE. JEANS BY ACNE STUDIOS. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY LIZIE BEN SHMUEL. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY NICHOLSON BAIRD.

The Local Train: 'We Never Believed In Putting Something Out Just for the Sake of Staying Relevant'

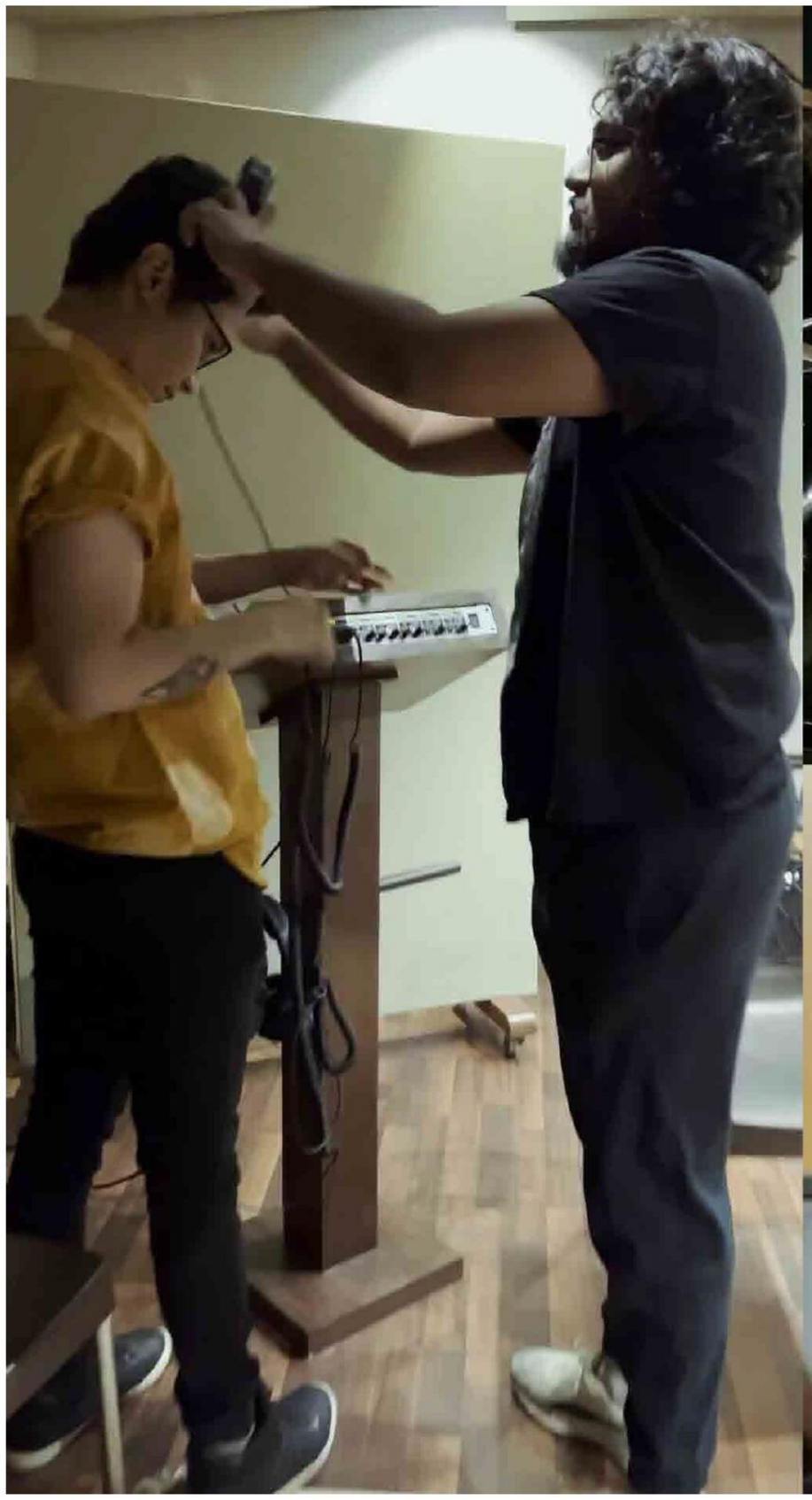
The trio recently put out 'Tu Hai Kahaan' with veteran pop voice Lucky Ali for the movie 'Do Aur Do Pyaar'

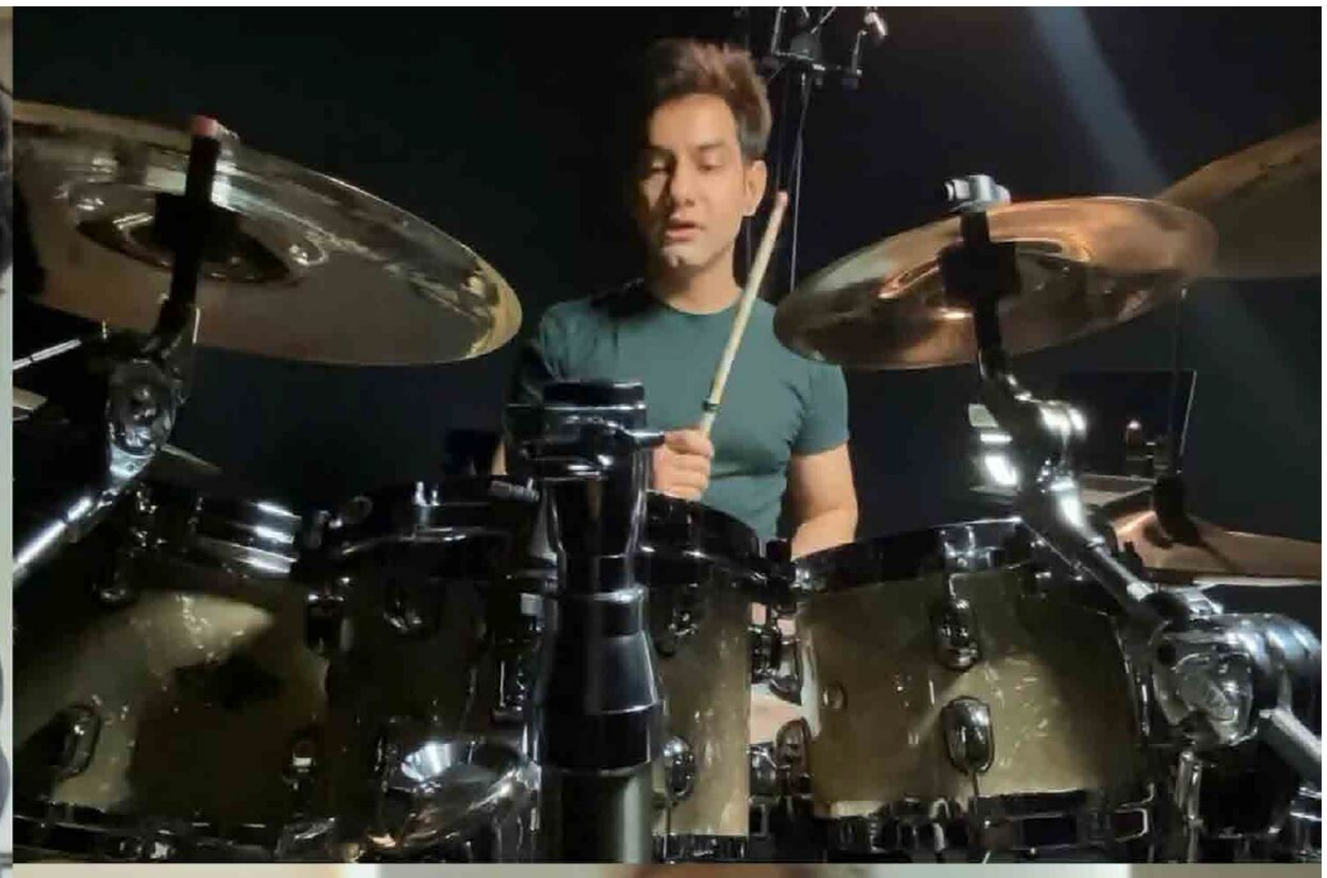
With the release of rock band The Local Train's "Tu Hai Kahaan" with pop veteran Lucky Ali on vocals, they were back on people's feeds after at least a couple of years away from the limelight following the exit of their vocalist-guitarist Raman Negi.

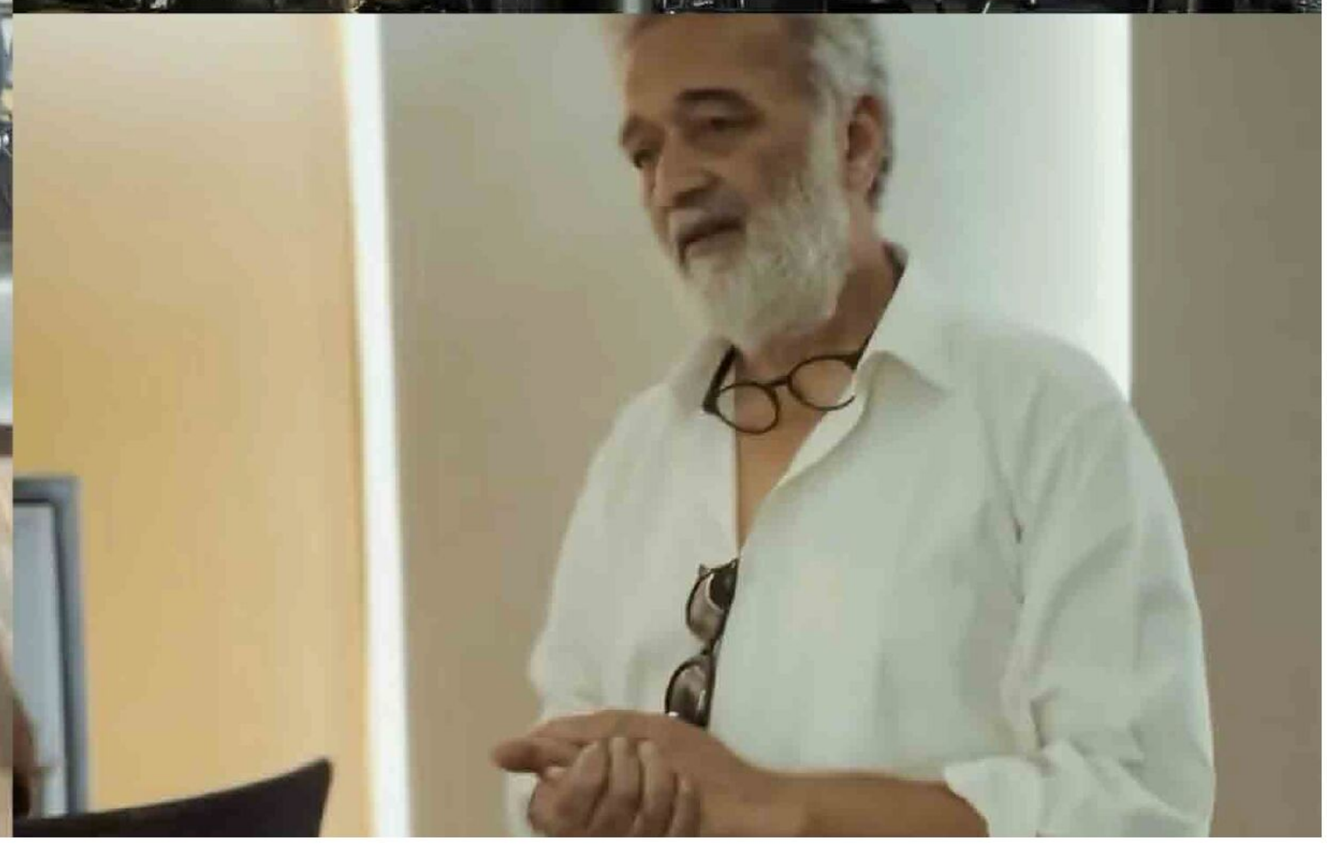
The song was part of the newly-released movie soundtrack *Do Aur Do Pyaar*, but was originally created in around 2022. There hadn't been much in terms of news from The Local Train's camp, but bassist Ramit Mehra, guitarist Paras Thakur and drummer Sahil Sarin tell *Rolling Stone India* that there were very much signs of life. Thakur says over a Zoom call, "We do understand from the outside perspective that there was radio silence for people. But internally, we never stopped. It was never like there was a decision to [think], 'Do we get back to this and all?' It was never that. We were constantly working, but we needed to get a little more perspective."

Thakur says the band had been active for so long that they did want to get back to it with an intent to "serve something" and come from a place that they connected with. To that end, The Local Train were never too far apart – even though Thakur now stays in a remote village ("I live deep inside an apple orchard on the slope of a mountain," he says) in North India and Mehra and Sarin moved back to Chandigarh.

The trio were still in touch on the regular, working internally in search for the connection as they regrouped. They had listening sessions, wrote down and discussed song ideas. "But we never believed in putting something out just for the sake of staying relevant," Thakur adds.







Being approached to work on a song for *Do Aur Do Pyaar* turned out to be just the catalyst to spur the band into action after a lot of "reassessing and realigning," according to Thakur. The romantic drama, starring actors Vidya Balan, Pratik Gandhi, Ileana D'Cruz and Sendhil Ramamurthy, is produced by Applause Entertainment and Ellipsis Entertainment Production, with the soundtrack released via Panorama Music.

Mehra recalls that when the filmmakers first approached The Local Train, the band members were in the process of shifting and resetting. "At that time, Himanshu [Chowdhury, manager] told them, 'Look, the band isn't in the right headspace.'" Eventually, however, the film's producer Swati Iyer Chawla reached out to management for an unrelated query and talk of doing a song for *Do Aur Do Pyaar* came up. Mehra says, "We said, 'All right. Let's just walk this path. Let's just see what comes out of it.'"

"We do understand from the outside perspective that there was radio silence for people. But internally, we never stopped," says Thakur.

Sarin adds, "They showed us some footage and I think we connected to it, and I think that is also very important to us when we do something, that it's talking to us emotionally." The song found its vocalist in Lucky Ali after it was finished. Thakur says their primary objective with the project was to first make sure they'd made a song that did justice to the movie's narrative. "Then the question came of, 'We must find the best collab possible for a vibe like this,'" Thakur adds. Mehra recalls getting on Zoom calls with Ali at first and then heading down to Bengaluru to record with him in person. The bassist calls it a very comfortable experience.

The band members speak in an excited tone when talking about getting to work with Ali, a beloved pop voice for anyone who grew up in the late Nineties and early 2000s. Sarin adds, "It's like we knew him. We used to travel to Delhi a lot from Chandigarh and we used to listen to him on the way, his music." Deservedly, one of India's most popular Hindi rock bands of the 2010s getting to work with Ali is hailed as a full circle moment by Sarin. Thakur adds, "He [Ali] was one of the benchmarks of how you do music when it's not for a film because very few references existed for that in India."

The release of "Tu Hai Kahaan" comes at a point where The Local Train is ready for more activity in 2024. They remain carefully unspecific about their plans but promise that everything will be revealed in due time. "It [the song release] segues really nicely into what we're about to do next," Thakur says. Mehra explains the momentum has certainly picked up in the last few months. "We have a lot of excitement to share in the next few months. I can put it like that," the bassist says.

Mehra says all the finer details about "who else we're going to be working with" and whether at all they will work with "other people" or not will be addressed as well. "I think we'll keep dropping hints as we keep moving along, but the only thing that we'd like to tell people is that we will continue doing what we've been doing for the last decade or more, and they can keep expecting more and more stuff from us," he adds. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Diljit Dosanjh on 'Amar Singh Chamkila' and International Collabs

All eyes are on Netflix's latest biopic on the life of a legendary Punjabi voice, which is essayed by the singer-actor

With the release of Imtiaz Ali's biopic *Amar Singh Chamkila* on Netflix today, a new narrative of sorts gets built around the titular character, essayed by singer and actor Diljit Dosanjh. Joined by Parineeti Chopra (who plays Chamkila's wife Amarjot), the film also features music by composing legend A.R. Rahman.

All in all, it's a heavy-hitter project for Dosanjh – who was, around this time last year, performing at Coachella festival in the U.S. in what became a landmark set. As part of a general press round, Dosanjh fielded questions about the making of *Chamkila*, how he doesn't really think back to Coachella and is only moving forward. Excerpts:

According to you, why should people watch *Amar Singh Chamkila*?

I personally feel that everyone knows about Chamkila, but if there's someone out there who hasn't heard of him, it's a very interesting story. It's not that it's just an artist's story, but about a human being, his journey and what he experiences through time. [It's set] in the Eighties [and] it shows a lot about what Punjab was like and what the atmosphere was [in the country]. It's not a fictional story, but a true story. You'll get a lot to learn, about Chamkila. I think those who are fans of Chamkila will watch it anyway.

What drew you to the role and what was the prep like to play the 'Elvis of Punjab'?

For us, Chamkila is held in higher regard than Elvis. There was a lot more prep for [director] Imtiaz Ali. In his mind, he had a clear idea about how to

(L to R) Parineeti Chopra as Amarjot Kaur, Diljit Dosanjh as Amar Singh Chamkila in the film directed by Imtiaz Ali.

represent Chamkila. I followed his lead. I had an idea about how he [Chamkila] behaved, talked, performed. I don't copy anyone in my acting, but when I'm doing a biopic like this, I had to take on his characteristics and stay true to that.

Were you influenced by Chamkila's music?

100 percent, I was inspired by his compositions and the style he sang in. Put aside the choice of lyrics, it's his personal choice, his pronunciation also was so clear that you could understand everything he was singing. I'm a fan of all those things about it. He's a scientist in that sense.

What was it like working with Parineeti Chopra?

I didn't expect it, the way Parineeti owned playing Amarjot's character. She sang her songs – it's very difficult to sing like Amarjot. She had a unique voice, just like Chamkila. We can't even sing two percent like them. Those folks are gone but I was astounded that Parineeti could do this, because she's not raised in Punjab and lived that everyday life, but she tried so hard and put her all into this project. It exceeded my expectations.

What can you tell us about the songs you have sung for the film, whose soundtrack is helmed by A.R. Rahman?

I asked him [Rahman] at first, 'How will these songs be presented and how will people understand it?' Then I understood that we were going to sing his songs on stage in the film. It's edited in a way that you get to understand what Chamkila is singing about on stage. In the rest of the film, the background songs are all new which Imtiaz sir worked on with Rahman sir, which Irshad Kamil has written. They're lovely songs.

Imtiaz Ali has said that *Chamkila* is about an eternal love story between a musician and his music. What do you think about that?

100 percent. I agree with that. You get to see the passion of Chamkila throughout the movie and his journey. I think music lovers – and I think every person on earth loves music, whether it's someone who listens during their office commute, going to or at the gym, or after downing two pegs – will understand that this is the story of music. I think everyone will love it.

How do you think the film will do in terms of honoring and preserving Chamkila's legacy?

I think people will get to know him deeper through the medium of this film. It's almost like a schooling – of his personal life, his songs and how he thought and behaved.

It's going to come up to a year since you performed at Coachella. It was a landmark moment for you and Indian music. It feels like you and your team had a lot planned based on the success of those shows, right? How do you look back on all that came to fruition?

I think that's done now. I never look back and think about it. I just look forward.

In the weeks after Coachella, you were in the studio with a lot of big artists like Sia, A Boogie wit Da Hoodie, Saweetie, NLE Choppa and others. Is that part of a project that'll see the light of day soon, or was it something to test the waters at the time?

These songs are all done and they're going to keep coming out one by one. The first song with Sia is out, 'Hass Hass,' the song with Saweetie came next ['Khutti'] and the one after that is the song with NLE Choppa and then the one with A Boogie Wit Da Hoodie. These are singles and I tried collaborating with all these folks and the songs will keep coming out gradually.

Punjabi music has had a very powerful influence on Bollywood and mainstream music in India. Do you feel some kind of responsibility as a Punjabi artist to keep pushing the boundaries so that it shapes the next movement/era in Indian modern music?

If you think about it as a responsibility, that's some heavy-lifting stuff. I think it's best to keep doing your work and God will take care of the rest.

What else is coming up in 2024?

There's a Punjabi film called *Jatt and Juliet* coming out and then there's this film. If it gets censored then one more film will come out [*laughs*]. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF NETFLIX

‘No Filter Neha’: B-Town Celebs at Their Unfiltered Best

‘No Filter Neha’ is spilling the beans while also providing insightful analyses of celebrity narratives that are worth learning about, capturing the essence of human experiences and emotions

PREVIOUSLY A PODCAST, *No Filter Neha*, now in its sixth season, has transitioned to video on JioTV. In the realm of Indian entertainment, where glossy red carpets and meticulously manicured public images reign supreme, there’s a rarity: *No Filter Neha*—with its vivacious model turned actress and television personality show host, Neha Dhupia—is a more candid approach to celebrity interviews that peels away the facade and reveals B-town celebs “at their unfiltered best.”

In the promo, Dhupia promises to “grill, roast, and have a blast” with them, but the episodes are totally at ease; there isn’t apparent “grilling” or “roasting” going on. The guests open up and share personal anecdotes, thoughts, and opinions in a more genuine light thanks to a friendly exchange in a casual, relaxed, intimate setting, unencumbered by the demands of maintaining who they are. To emphasize, it’s a “blast” and not a hard-pressed “grill” or “roast.”

No Filter Neha is spilling the beans while also providing insightful analyses of celebrity narratives that are worth learning about, capturing the essence of human experiences and emotions. It’s creating a sense of belonging beyond celebrity stardom. I dig that and how the show flows seamlessly in tandem, moving past the superficial celebrity culture and offering a more profound understanding of the individuals behind the fame.

There are redeeming aspects to this show, such as its rejection of sensationalism and emphasis on honest conversation that strikes a chord.

Thus far, the current installment has featured the likes of Shahid Kapoor, Tiger Shroff, Kareena Kapoor Khan, Kriti Sanon, Vicky Kaushal, Ananya Panday, Rashmika Mandanna, and Kartik Aaryan.

From Shahid Kapoor discussing his unwavering work ethic and challenges to success to Kareena Kapoor Khan addressing love and life in greater detail, Vicky Kaushal sharing fun anecdotes and his part in the household dynamics to Kartik Aaryan talking of how he often broke down upon multiple denials in auditions, there’s everything—their never-settle moments, guilty-not-guilty occasions, going the extra mile instances—and nearly every detail in between—secrets and confessions for an engaging consumption.

There are redeeming aspects to this show, such as its rejection of sensationalism and emphasis on honest conversation that strikes a chord. Dhupia’s innate knack for making her visitors feel at ease and her propensity to pose interesting yet respectful questions add to that. Her easygoing and informal manner makes it feel more like an unhurried interaction between friends than a structured formal interview. It entertains and humanizes the artists, making them more approachable and endearing—allowing us to connect with them on a deeper level.

When it comes to "unfiltered conversation with celebrities," I think how difficult the entire procedure could be. With the public relations teams and others involved. It's a thing I face often when interviewing artists. I may have to run them through the questions, but I must inevitably go through the PR and artist agencies first for approval. Thus, in an "unfiltered" conversation, "unfiltered" could be the trickiest to achieve, albeit *No Filter Neha*, which lives true to its name and meets much of its promise. I'm not sure how much of the PR thing it has to cope with.

Unlike in the iconic Indian celebrity talk shows, *Koffee with Karan* and *The Kapil Sharma Show*—roping in the Bollywood biggies for candid talk—amid producer-director Karan Johar's famed rapid-fire questions, oodles of banter, gossip, and loads happening over a cup of coffee, frequently triggering controversies—and stand-up comedian, TV host, actor and singer Kapil Sharma's playful discourse, and comedic moments focusing on entertainment through humor—*No Filter Neha* prioritizes relatable interactions, allowing celebrities to speak up in a happy space where vulnerability is not only accepted but celebrated.

I see this unique dynamic between the host and her guests. Dhupia maintains a sense of humor that is very positive, in good spirits and includes a propensity to have fun with herself, make it light for those around her, share laughter with them, and carry out lighthearted conversations even when the topics she may raise may be serious. Her amiable demeanor and warm agreeableness draw the best out of the show and the show attendees, perhaps. She has this talent for speaking in good faith, I believe, which allows her to express what it is, and that sets *No Filter Neha* apart—a joyful, free-flowing exchange that prioritizes honesty over showmanship. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

‘Khosla Ka Ghosla’ Composer Dhruv Dhalla Has New Music and a New Perspective

The keyboardist and composer’s next song will appear in Bollywood film ‘Mr. & Mrs. Mahi,’ with singer Kavita Seth and lyricist Devendra Kafir

FILM MUSIC AND AD JINGLE composer Dhruv Dhalla took his own path to learn about the importance of doing work that satisfies one’s soul. Known for composing “Chak De Phatte” for the cult Hindi film *Khosla Ka Ghosla* and creating the background score for *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!*, Dhalla says that after the two films got him on the radar, he was often only asked to recreate the formula for the next projects.

In 2010, Dhalla – New Delhi-raised and once enrolled in the Western composition course at Musicians Institute in Los Angeles – composed music for *Tere Bin Laden* for director Abhishek Sharma. The composer says, “At that time, I remember telling him, ‘I want so many films and songs.’ He looked at me and smiled. He said, even if you do one or two brilliant things in your life, that is more than enough. Doing a hundred mediocre things is not going to help you. That made a lot of sense to me later.”

Since the 2010s, Dhalla has been much more selective about the kind of work he takes on, preferring to stick to ad work and documentary scores to sustain. In May, however, he’ll have another big-banner Bollywood movie song to his name – a yet-to-be-revealed song from the sports-themed romantic drama *Mr. & Mrs. Mahi* starring Rajkummar Rao and Janhvi Kapoor and directed by Sharan Sharma under Dharma Productions. It’s sung by vocalist Kavita Seth and even has a production assist from singer-composer Kanishk Seth, with lyrics written by Devendra Kafir.

Dhalla says he had originally composed the melody for the song and called on Kafir, his friend, to write Punjabi lyrics. The song had gained a Sufi touch, which led Kafir to suggest Seth to come on board as the singer. Dhalla adds, “We had no plan of presenting it to producers but Kavita *ji*, when she was done with the song, she told me to make sure that we keep it for a good project and a big film. She turned out to be our lucky charm because it actually reached Dharma and got picked up for the movie.” Inspired by Kanishk Seth’s work with Kavita for “Rangi Saari,” he brought the producer in on this track. Dhalla says, “It’s always better for me, as an artist, to collaborate with younger people, because I think they probably know popular music today better than me.”

In the time since projects like *Khosla Ka Ghosla*, Dhalla says he’s learned to measure things out and wait on good opportunities, focusing on the impact his music might have on people and how that, in turn, would “benefit me as an artist in the future.” He adds, “These are the things which you realize over time after you made your mistakes. So, even if I get one project a year, or one project in two years, as long as it’s prestigious, it gets me excited.”

Dhalla is next working on a film project with director Sanjay Gupta, composing for a song with Shibani Kashyap. Dhalla, who was once tapped by fusion veterans Euphoria’s Palash Sen to be a part of the live lineup during his college days, is keen to get back to performing on stage as well. He says, “I got tied up in the studio after [Euphoria] and never saw the stage, apart from people here and there calling me to play the piano. I’m now missing the part of my life where I used to be on stage and interact with people in real time.” When his next film song is out, Dhalla says he’ll play live as well, drawing from his repertoire of the last two decades. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Korea's Vision for the Future of Hallyu

It's aimed at an in-depth global awareness to sufficiently recognize and value the implications of Korean popular culture

KOREA'S MINISTRY OF CULTURE, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) and the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) hosted the Forum on Understanding Hallyu Acceptance and Cultural Diversity a while ago (April 23).

A press release from MCST stresses the need to raise global awareness given Hallyu and K-content's massive appeal and expanding fan base. While Hallyu content is now a worldwide craze, the piece highlights its role in issues relating to inappropriate cultural appropriation, misrepresentations, and disputes over cultural assets, which call for a greater sense of consciousness from Hallyu content makers to properly present the genre to fans and consumers from varying cultural perspectives.

Growing love and acceptance of Korean popular culture has bolstered the country's soft power on the world stage by fostering a sense of pride and identity in the country. The Hallyu Wave, aka the Korean Wave, has evolved from an elementary form of entertainment to a potent force influencing attitudes around the world, promoting cross-cultural exchanges, and achieving both diplomatic and economic goals.

Thus, the Hallyu Wave is a manifestation of popular culture's transformative abilities. The multifaceted approach to driving up the international recognition of K-Content not only represents a vision for this wave's global influence to grow but also shows South Korea's continued championing of its creative entertainment and cultural exports as a means of encouraging cultural awareness and exchange.

However, it seems that as Hallyu and K-content evolve, it becomes imperative for stakeholders, including content creators, media platforms, and cultural institutions, to prioritize

global sensitivity and understanding in their engagement with international audiences—to appreciate the messages and themes portrayed in Korean dramas, music, films, and the like—and avoid misunderstandings or misconceptions of Korean culture.

This can help ensure that K-content not only entertains but also catalyzes meaningful cultural interaction and mutual respect for others. It's something that inevitably calls for an in-depth global awareness to sufficiently recognize and value the implications of Korean popular culture.

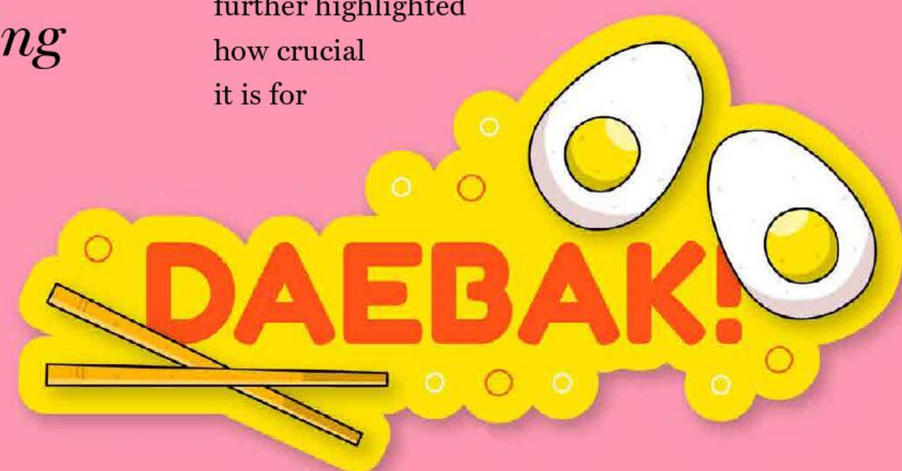
For that and to evaluate the level of acceptability of Hallyu in several cultural contexts and devise inclusive strategies, experts from administration, academic circles, industry, and other relevant bodies were summoned to the Forum on Understanding Hallyu Acceptance and Cultural Diversity. The press release at hand covers the following in this vein:

Opinions from a range of academic disciplines were offered in the primary part of the event, which dealt with a comprehensive understanding of Hallyu and cultural diversity. It aimed to include components corresponding to all aspects of the gaming industry under the umbrella of "Progressing Diversity in K-Gaming," in addition to a conversation on K-Pop and Cultural Diversity: A New Era of K-Pop and Cultural Diversity from a Hallyu Perspective and Challenges for a New Leap.

The subsequent segment assessed Hallyu's acceptability in light of genres and field experiences. Pop culture critic Kim Yun-ha identified cultural diversity in K-pop with artists, fandom, and content amid talks on the challenges of cultural diversity from a localization standpoint and the responsibility of cultural content's influence on society and its widespread acceptance.

Drawing from firsthand experiences with Hallyu, the forum further highlighted how crucial it is for individuals to learn about and engage in cross-cultural exchanges.

Among others, the vision calls for Hallyu content creators to be more conscious of how they present the genre to consumers and fans from varying cultural perspectives.



According to Yong Ho-sung, Deputy Minister of International Cultural Affairs and Public Relations Office at MCST, the forum serves as an invaluable discussion platform that looks at how Hallyu is viewed and embraced in the global community while simultaneously deciding the direction that Hallyu content should go. "Cultural diversity will be a crucial orientation for the identity and sustainable expansion of Hallyu," he stated. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

IMAGE BY FREEPIK

IN THE BLACK

The Amy Winehouse Business Is Booming

Thirteen years after the retro-soul singer's death, tribute bands, album reissues, and a new biopic are keeping her rebel spirit alive

By DAVID BROWNE

As ANTHONY D'AMATO preps backstage at Sony Hall in midtown Manhattan, it's hard not to notice his six-foot height, horn-rimmed glasses — and the name "Amy" in large black letters on the side of his head. It's not a tattoo, just black liquid eyeliner easy to wash off, but it suits the occasion. In a few minutes, the New Jerseyan and his 12-piece band will walk onstage, take their places beneath an LED sign lit up with Amy Winehouse's first name and a simulation of her signature beehive, and play her *Back to Black* album start to finish — and hardly for the first time, either. "I really never imagined that it would become something that I would have done maybe 200 times at this point," says D'Amato, who uses the stage name Remember Jones. "My queer friends, all people of color, my mom — everybody knew who Amy Winehouse was."

In July 2011, Winehouse was found dead of alcohol poisoning at her home in the Camden neighborhood in London. She left behind a mere two albums (including the 2006 retro-pop classic *Back to Black*) and a checkered personal life plagued by addiction, marriage, divorce, and a million paparazzi photos documenting it all. In the years since, her musical and cultural influence have only grown. Lana Del Rey, Adele, Lady Gaga, and Future have all cited her as an influence; Miley Cyrus and Måneskin have covered her songs onstage. D'Amato's show is merely one of many tribute acts working around the world, from the U.S. and the U.K. to Serbia and Slovenia, many featuring Winehouse lookalike singers sporting her trademark hairstyle, winged eyeliner, pumps, and miniskirts.

Fans can make a pilgrimage to Camden to see a life-size bronze statue of Winehouse erected in her honor in 2014. (Early this year, to protest Israel's attacks in Gaza, someone covered the Star of David necklace on the statue with a sticker of a Palestinian flag.) For $135,000, Winehouse die-hards — who call themselves either Winettes or Cherries (after her song "Cherry") — could even own the nearly 230 books in her personal library. A few years ago, the Washington, D.C., rare-books dealer Type Punch Matrix bought the collection at a charity auction organized by Winehouse's family and is now offering it for sale. The collection includes books on her hero Frank Sinatra, Jackie Collins novels, bios of musicians who battled addiction (Anthony Kiedis, Jimi Hendrix), a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* with an unfinished lyric tucked inside, and certain volumes with obvious wear and tear. "It's pretty clear she was reading some of these in the bathtub, or lighting candles in her apartment and these were under them," says Type Punch Matrix co-owner Brian Cassidy. "The condition helps tell

the story and speaks to the life." One book sports a lipstick kiss. "I can't prove it's Amy's," Cassidy says, "but I'm pretty sure."

At the same time, the musical-industrial complex around Winehouse has expanded. Her legacy now includes more than a dozen reissues, compilations, live recordings, and documentaries. This year, the reissue of her 2003 debut, *Frank*, will be commemorated with a new edition and video for "In My Bed." Arriving this month is *Back to Black*, a biopic directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson (who also helmed the John Lennon biopic *Nowhere Boy*). During filming, the director herself noticed Winehouse's ubiquity. "You walk into a restaurant, she's singing," Taylor-Johnson says. "You walk around the corner, there's a mural. You walk into a shop, there's a poster. You see people with a T-shirt or a scarf. It feels everywhere all the time."

When Winehouse died, much was made of her age — 27, the same as Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and others in the so-called "27 Club." At the time, comparisons to those rock legends felt a little premature, but 13 years after her death, they've been proven true. One of the first major pop stars of the millennium, Winehouse is now the equivalent of a Cobain or Morrison for the generation who came of age with pop in this century, and with a fan base and industry to match. "She's in the same breath, not just biographically but artistically," says Cassidy. "There's tragedy there, but also a lot of joy and creativity. There's something very archetypal about her life."

As her former bass player Dale Davis says, "You get these people who come along once a generation and just change everything up completely. So it doesn't surprise me in the slightest that interest is still there. It's a short career, like Cobain, but the impact is massive, isn't it?"

When trying to pinpoint the moment that the posthumous Winehouse industry kicked into gear, all roads point to *Amy*, director Asif Kapadia's 2015 documentary. The film made $23 million worldwide, an exceptional number for a doc of any sort, and won the Oscar for best documentary. "There was interest right after that," says Sony Music Publishing executive Chris Jones, who oversees the licensing of her songs.

Soon after the film, Davis was approached about reuniting Winehouse's touring band behind an Amy-style frontperson. Originally called Forever Amy and since renamed the Amy Winehouse Band, the U.K.-based tribute show re-creates a standard Winehouse set list. "If we're going to give people the feeling of how it was," Davis says, "I thought it was easier to stick to an original show and have the same format."

Davis, who admits he had concerns about the idea, says he experienced an unsettling moment during one of the group's early shows in 2016, when an Italian singer was performing as Winehouse. "My bass guitar wouldn't stay in tune for the whole night," he says. "At that point, I thought Amy was trying to tell me something." But after seeing emotional fans at shows and hearing from another that their mother was dying — and attended the show so she could have a Winehouse experience before she passed — Davis reconciled with his decision. Save for a period during the pandemic, the Amy Winehouse Band has been working ever since. Davis also says that Amy's father, Mitch Winehouse (who declined comment for this story), saw a show and gave his blessing: "He found it very emotional."

Both the Winehouse Band and D'Amato's "Back to Back to Black" shows purposefully avoid lead singers who replicate Winehouse's look; the Winehouse Band's current frontperson, Bronte Shande, sports neither beehive nor Amy-style makeup. "I want someone to have the spirit of Amy like Bronte does," Davis says. "I've worked with the original Amy. I don't need to work with someone who looks like her." D'Amato, whose show features both him and several different male and female singers, also has mixed feelings about lookalike acts. "I don't knock it, but some of them are just not great," he says. "The singer can't quite sing it or doesn't pull off the thing. You can't really try to copy Amy."

Not every Winehouse-related project has panned out. A hologram tour, in which Davis and her old band would have accompanied a simulated Winehouse, was announced in 2018 but fell through for reasons that remain unclear. But overall, the business of Winehouse appears to be in healthy shape. According to one industry source, her publishing catalog is likely valued at nearly 20 times its annual earnings (on the high end of such evaluations). Last year, Openville Ltd., the private company directed by her divorced parents, Mitch and Janis, that oversees that business, had equity of about $2 million. According to Royalty Exchange, which allows investors to buy shares of royalties of select songs, Winehouse's catalog is "highlighted by consistent, still-growing earnings" and is "above the 75th percentile of all catalogs analyzed by Royalty Exchange." Last year, the video for "Back to Black" vaulted past 1 billion views on YouTube, 17 years after its release.

The Winehouse windfall is sure to spike with the release of *Back to Black*, which stars British actress Marisa Abela and traces Winehouse's life from her teen years through her death. "Interest has been steady over the last five, six years," says Jones. "I think the forthcoming film will boost that significantly." Rockabilia, the online store that sells officially licensed music merch, is predicting a surge in its Winehouse T-shirt sales. "We've definitely seen an uptick in Bob Marley with the movie that just came out," says co-owner Frankie Blydenburgh. "I think Amy will pick up for sure."

During the filming of *Back to Black*, photos of Abela as Winehouse made their way around the internet, much to the displeasure of some Winehouse fans. "It's a fucking sick joke — Amy would be pissed off at this shit," wrote a fan in a typical sentiment. Davis witnessed the outcry for himself. "I've had people who are supposedly friends of mine on my Instagram feed saying, 'Let's make a petition to stop the film,'" he says. "It's so fresh in people's minds, and they have a lot of opinions." Adds Taylor-Johnson, "You're like, 'You're judging an entire movie on one picture.' I think people are nervous, and all I can say is I treated her with reverence, respect, and everything she deserved."

The fervency of Winehouse's fan base may recall that of past rock legends, but it also brings with it a new twist. Her breakthrough coincided with the rise of social media, and the way her life was so publicly on display connected with members of a generation who've lived their lives on social media as well. "Seeing her and some of her struggles, some people identify with it instead of sensationalizing it," says D'Amato. "They think, 'She's more like me.'"

After his band's 90-minute show, which included favorites like "Valerie" and "Fuck Me Pumps," D'Amato was approached by a fan with a Winehouse tattoo on her arm. "This happens pretty often," he says later. "I always thought I should be taking a photo with the people who show me their tattoos. To put Amy on your skin, it's got to connect to you in a deep way."

I TOLD YOU I WAS TROUBLE Abela as Winehouse in *Back to Black*.

"You get these people who come along once a generation and just change everything up completely. The impact is massive, isn't it?"

Tiger Baby Records Unveils 'Dance With Me,' a Funky Collaboration with SoBo House of Music

The EP includes vocals by students from SoBo House of Music

TIGER BABY Records, known for its bold releases, is now venturing into a new sonic territory with its latest offering, *Dance With Me*. This six-track EP, a collaboration with Mumbai-based music school SoBo House of Music, dives headfirst into the realms of disco and funk, showcasing the talents of six vibrant young voices.

Following the success of their previous releases, including *Baccha Kisko Bol Raha Hai* and the hip-hop EP featuring rising stars Saniya MQ and Kavikaar, Tiger Baby Records continues to push boundaries with *Dance With Me*. Partnering with Platoon Music, an Apple-owned entity specializing in artist services and music distribution, this EP marks the label's commitment to nurturing emerging talent across diverse genres.

Released earlier this month, *Dance With Me* has been crafted by SoBo House of Music's instructors Stephen Fernandes, Bradley Tellis, Garth D'mello, and Nathan D'souza – seasoned musicians and educators – the EP delivers a collection of infectious, groove-laden tracks brought to life by the youthful exuberance of Divisha Khandelwal, Annika Nair, Shriya Rao, Sana Lamba, Anaisha Chaudhary and Soha Koradia.

Dance With Me transports listeners on a nostalgic journey, evoking memories of disco balls, vibrant hues, and satin ensembles. Each track pulsates with energy, inviting audiences to lose themselves in the rhythm. The young vocalists imbue their performances with a confidence and flair, drawing inspiration from icons like Ella Fitzgerald and Taylor Swift while infusing their renditions with a modern twist.

Ankur Tewari, co-founder and creative director of Tiger Baby Records, sheds light on the EP's creative genesis, he said in a statement, "When we asked some kids what they love dancing to, a bunch of them said ABBA and *Disco Deewaane* by Nazia Hasan. In a statement, Fernandes, founder SoBo House of Music, said, "When the opportunity arose to collaborate with Tiger Baby Records on something as exciting as this, we were all in." He added, "We consider ourselves truly grateful to be able to produce and showcase the young talent we've been nurturing over the years."

Dance With Me is available on all major streaming platforms, inviting listeners to embrace the joy of dance and revel in the beats of disco and funk. With its seamless fusion of retro nostalgia and contemporary flair, this EP promises to captivate audiences of all ages and set the dance floor ablaze with its infectious rhythms. **DAVID BRITTO**

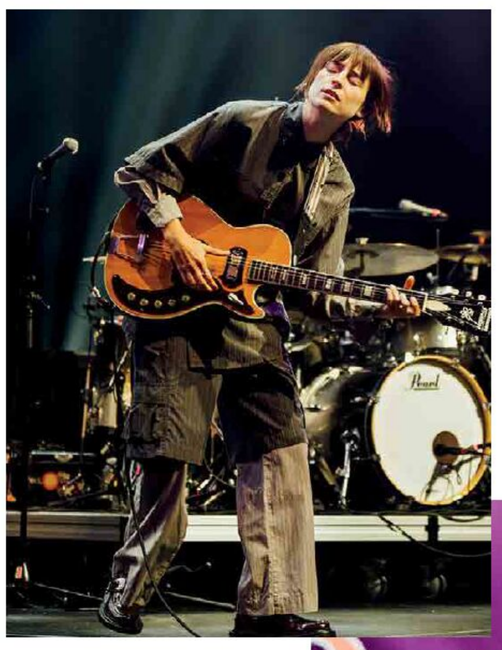
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

SXSW 2024

‘Rolling Stone’ Brings the Party to Texas

there was no hotter event at SXSW this year than Peso Pluma’s headlining set on the second night of Rolling Stone’s Future of Music showcase. People lined up around multiple city blocks in Austin to see the música mexicana superstar — including one dedicated fan who was there at 4 a.m. the morning before the show and later got to meet his hero. Peso’s unforgettable performance was a highlight of our second annual showcase, which brought some of the coolest names in music to ACL Live at the Moody Theater over four nights in March. (Full disclosure: Rolling Stone’s parent company, P-MRC, acquired a 50 percent stake in the SXSW festival in 2021.)

Peso Pluma



◀ FAYE WEBSTER

She’s quietly become a major live draw, and on the showcase’s guitar-heavy fourth night, Webster showed why with a performance full of sweet pedal-steel notes, funny yet relatable lyrics, potently chill indie grooves, and a few words in support of the Palestinian people.

▼ YOUNG MIKO

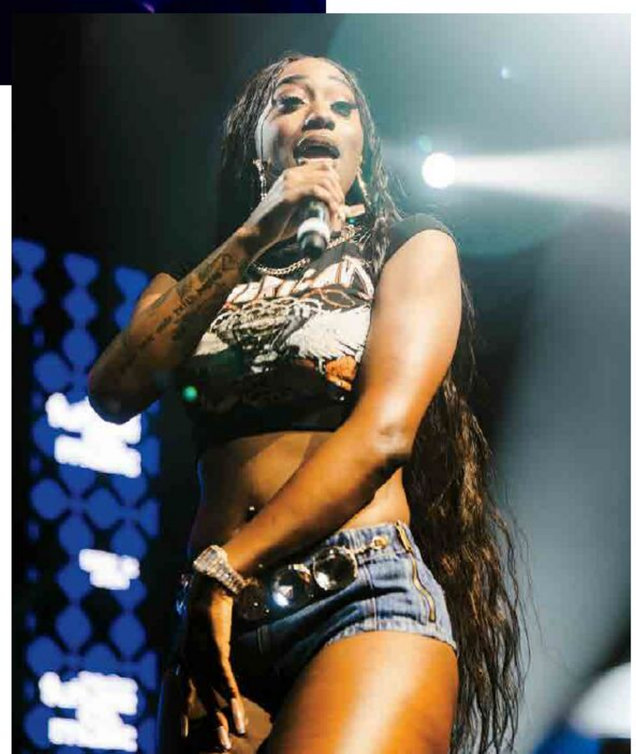
A few years ago, Young Miko was a promising artist to watch. Now, it feels like the world belongs to the super-charming Puerto Rican MC — and she brought the house down with a headliner-worthy performance right before Peso Pluma took the stage on night two.

▲ TEEZO TOUCHDOWN

The shape-shifting rap-rock star gave a fantastic performance on night one, including a story about the time he and some friends from his hometown of Beaumont, Texas, came to SXSW in 2018 and busked on the street.

▶ FLO MILLI

The unstoppable MC from Mobile, Alabama, was onstage firing off bar after bar on night three of our showcase at the moment when her long-awaited new album, *Fine Ho, Stay*, dropped. How’s that for a flex?



FROM RIGHT: SAMANTHA TELLEZ, 2; DUSANA RISOVIC, 2; SALIHAH SAADIQ

Q&A

Omar Apollo

The Mexican American star on befriending SZA, jamming out to Beyoncé, and making music for arenas

BY TOMÁS MIER

Omar apollo is looking at himself through Zoom as he tries on the beige Sherpa jacket he just bought. "You fuck with it?" he asks.

It's hard not to fuck with everything the Mexican American alt-R&B star does. Apollo dropped his debut album, *Ivory*, in April 2022, blew up with its ultra-sentimental song "Evergreen," and followed that success by touring with SZA last year. Recently, he's been dipping into fashion. (A massive billboard of him dripped in the luxury designer Loewe looms over Sunset Boulevard in L.A.)

Apollo is back in L.A. these days, putting the finishing touches on his upcoming album, out in the summer. He's experimenting with jazz, house, and other genres, and he tells me it's the best music he's ever made. And, nah, he's not just saying that.

How are you?
I'm good. I've been posted up, finishing the album. We're mixing, and I'm really excited. How are you?

Good. I just got back from visiting family in Durango, Mexico.
Duranguense! I know the dance. You're supposed to act like you got a penny stuck in between your cheeks or something.

Your knees.
Oh, your knees? I remember my mom would teach me how to do that. I was in *baile folklórico* when I was younger. It was zapateado and dances like that. The girls had the little clicks in their hands and the big dresses. The guys would have sombreros and mariachi-looking pants.

How are you feeling about this new album? I read that you are angrier on it.
Angrier, definitely, on the single "Spite." Now it's back to my old longing-for-love vibe, but it's reimagined. I got in with Teo Halm. He's been my friend since I was 17 years old. We met when I worked at Guitar Center.

We reconnected on "Evergreen." We flew to London for two or three months last year. It was really no breaks. It was cool to get into that state of mind where everything is about making music we both love and connect to. The album doesn't feel like it's a bunch of songs put together. It's a sequence that is made to be listened to front to back.

There's one house-infused song that feels like it came from left field.
I was trying to paint an image. I want to be able to set a scene the way that a film would. I wanted something people could just be at the club with, because when you think of my music, you don't think about the club. So I'm like, "Fuck, I need some club shit." But it was just how I was feeling at the time, in London especially. I was going to so many parties.

Who were some of your inspirations on here?
It was, like, Kate Bush, Giorgio Moroder, Labi Siffre. Let me pull out the playlist: Daniel Johnston, he's sick. Jeff Buckley, Lana Del Rey, for sure. I've also been listening to a lot of Beyoncé.

Which album?
4. That album's insane.

You have your Disha Hot sauce going to Taco Bell.
My mom made the hot sauce recipe. I wanted to do a relaunch of my hot sauce, but I had to make *Ivory*. I was like, "Fuck, I have to put this aside for now and focus on the music." The hot sauce packets will be in every Taco Bell in America. It feels good because she crossed the border from Mexico and opened up a restaurant. When I was born, it became too much, so she had to shut it down. This was the hot sauce she used in the restaurant, so it's me being like, "Since I made you get the restaurant shut down by being born, this is how I'm paying you back."

What kind of food would your mom make?
She would make tortas ahogadas, chiles rellenos, aguachile. She made a lot of shit. She was so good at it, I'm not going to lie. That just made my mouth water.

The first time we spoke was two years ago, before the success of "Evergreen." How are you handling the fame that came at you pretty quickly?
It was weird at first. The things I'd say on the internet would come up in interviews. I'd be like, "Damn, people remember that? That was a tiny thought that I had." By the time "Evergreen" blew up, I already had the infrastructure that I needed to maintain, so it wasn't like, "Oh, what do we do now?" I had already done eight world tours. I was selling out venues, but it reached a way different level.

In L.A., you went from the Shrine to opening for SZA at the Forum.
When I played the Shrine, which was like 5,000 people, "Evergreen" hadn't blown up yet, so I was like, "Damn, I feel successful." After that show, I remember feeling like, "I want to triple this." And then the SZA tour happened, and I was like, "Fuck." I had to focus because that was an entire crowd of people who just didn't know me. It was scary. After the arena tour, that's when I figured out how I wanted to make music. I was like, "Oh, I want to make music for arenas."

Did you develop a friendship with SZA on tour?
Yeah, I did. On the road, it was super busy, but she's super sweet. We were at dinner a couple of months ago, and then I saw her at the Drake show. I was so drunk [*laughs*]. She's always showing love. ®

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Joshua White**

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FRESH INDIE PICKS

Check out new releases from independent acts

By **David Britto**

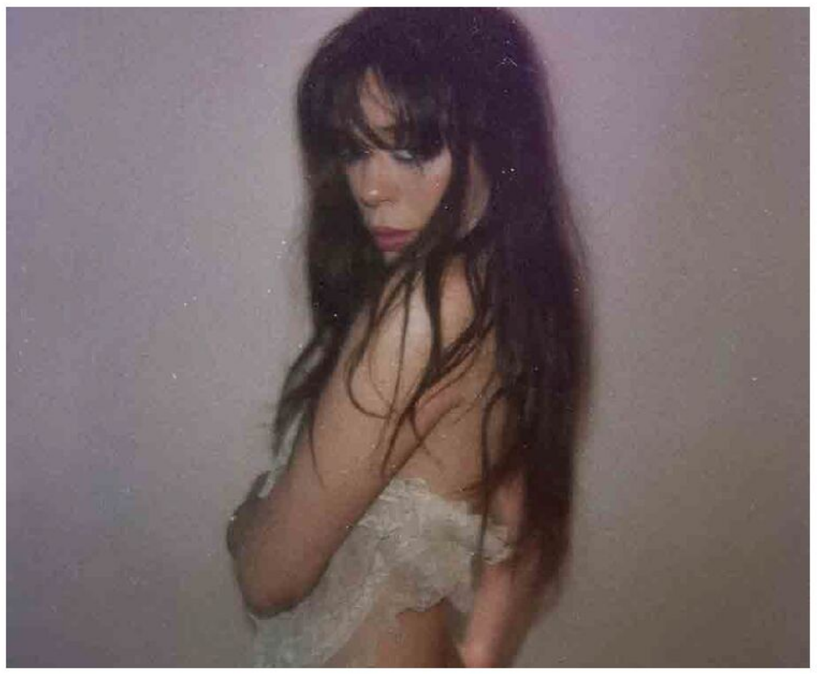
Musicbyraaj – *"Daur"*

"Daur," the latest single by musician Raaj Soni aka musicbyraaj, delves into the complexities of love and loss, inspired by personal experience. It captures the journey from anticipation to heartbreak with soulful vocals and emotive lyrics. In a statement, the artist said, "I believe everything happens for a reason, and perhaps, every ending is merely the prelude to something even more beautiful, pure, and real. 'DAUR' is not just my story; it resonates with everyone who has experienced the stages of a relationship and its eventual conclusion. It's a reminder to never cease loving."

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS; PRARTHANA SHETTY (DEREK & THE CATS, FRIZZELL D'SOUZA); SHREYA SHETTY (NUSH LEWIS); PRANAV MARDE (PRUTHVI)

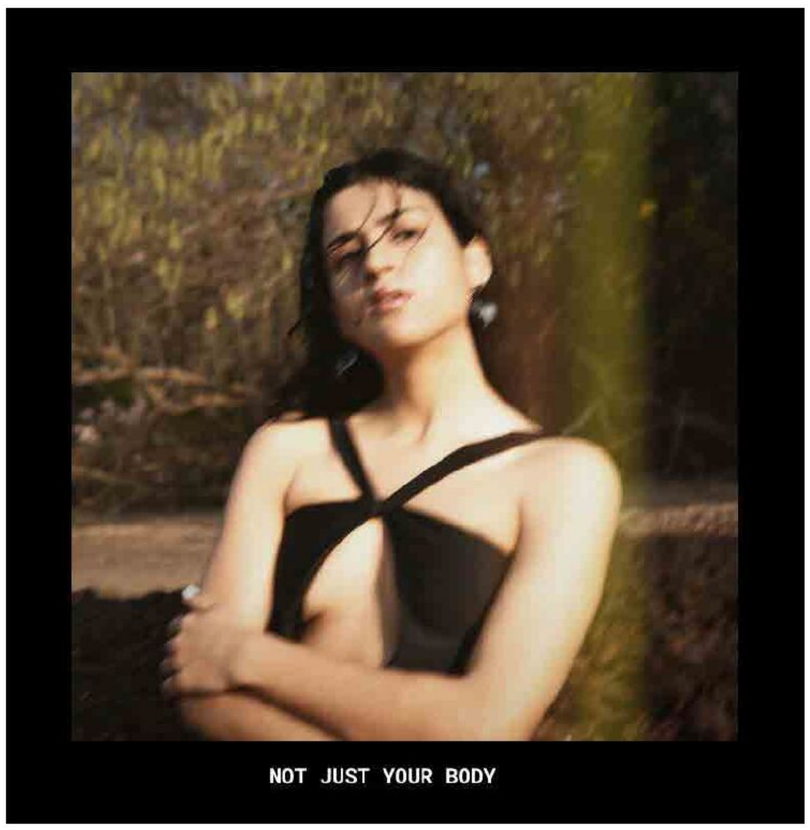
Derek & the Cats, Frizzell D'Souza – *"Diana"*

"Diana" marks a collaboration between Bengaluru's Derek & the Cats and singer-songwriter Frizzell D'Souza, blending jazz fusion with pop influences for a fresh sound. The song delves into themes of resilience and empowerment.



Nen – *"Only Human"*

"Only Human" by U.S.-based artist Nen encapsulates the vulnerability of existence, confronting the fear of being "too much" and embracing imperfection. The lyrics confess the struggle of hiding flaws and the desire to break free from self-imposed limitations. It's a poignant reminder of shared human fragility, offering solace in acceptance.



Shreya Bajpai — *"Not Just Your Body"*

Goa-based singer-songwriter Shreya Bajpai's latest single, "Not Just Your Body," blends sensuality with wit and sass. Produced by Mahesh Hiremath, the song features captivating guitar work by Mrinal Sharma and Cyril Gabriel. In a statement, Bajpai said, "There is a clear description of physical attraction but at the same time real emotions are involved which are stronger and become the chant 'Not Just Your Body" throughout the song. The overall idea of the song is just about having fun while feeling all this and not losing oneself in the process. The song acts like a breath of fresh air in the contemporary world of situationships by introducing new ideas and terms of forming meaningful bonds."

Lush Lightyear — *"Two Cents"*

Canada-based Lush Lightyear's "Two Cents" delves deep into his roots and upbringing, serving as a heartfelt reflection on his past. The track captures pivotal moments from his childhood and explores themes of religion, identity, and loss. Produced by DEYS, the song incorporates Indian influences, including flute sounds and Hindi verses, paying homage to the artist's heritage. In a statement, Lush Lightyear said, "It [the song] is essentially a self-reflection of my past and how that has shaped my thoughts and beliefs today. I am quite literally giving my 'two cents.'"

Aarya, Jaden Maskie – *"Dreams"*

"Dreams" marks the first collaboration between singer-songwriters Aarya and Jaden Maskie, blending their unique sounds into a captivating track. Inspired by their chance encounter years ago, the song explores different perspectives on dreams, from love to nostalgia for simpler times. With elements of dream-pop and heavy synth, the upbeat track tells a compelling story while inviting listeners to ponder.

Nush Lewis — *"In the Shadows"*

Singer-songwriter/harpist Nush Lewis' new song "In the Shadows" is a poignant exploration of grief and despair, set against a backdrop of war and loss. Evoking a sense of helplessness, the song invites listeners to confront their own experiences of darkness and sorrow. Derived from Lewis's EP Fused, it's an elevated rendition of her song "Frozen Eyes," produced by Ayan De. Retaining the essence of the original, it weaves emotive lyrics and haunting melodies, offering a space for introspection and catharsis.

pruthvi — *"twentytwo"*

Mumbai-based singer-songwriter pruthvi unveils her latest indie pop single, "twentytwo," produced by sudan. Reflecting on the whirlwind of emotions and experiences that accompany one's twenties, the track captures the fear and uncertainties of growing up. With catchy lyrics and a poignant narrative, "twentytwo" serves as a relatable soundtrack for those navigating the rollercoaster of early adulthood.

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

FAISAL KAPADIA

ON TURNING TO SYNTH-POP AND HIS FAVORITE INDIAN INDIE ACTS

ONE HALF OF LEGENDARY PAKISTANI POP-ROCK DUO STRINGS, KAPADIA TALKS ABOUT EVERYTHING FROM 'COKE STUDIO' TO HIS SOLO ALBUM 'ZINDAGI JAHAAN LE JAAYE' AND A POTENTIAL COLLABORATION WITH ANKUR TEWARI, KARSH KALE AND ARNOB

By **Anurag Tagat**

When Pakistani pop veteran Faisal Kapadia and his Strings co-founder Bilal Maqsood put an end to the band in 2021, it was a 33-year chapter in music that was being closed. Kapadia says over a Zoom call that he just didn't want to pursue music anymore.

He explains the thought from about three years ago, "I knew Bilal would like to do some production work, but I thought for myself that I'd had my share. I did whatever I was passionate about, so I'm just gonna take time off." Soon enough, while on vacation, he received a call from Xulfi, the Pakistani rock veteran and super-producer known for his work with bands like Entity Paradigm and Call. Kapadia was asked to be part of *Coke Studio Season 14*, which was being produced by Xulfi.

The allure, according to Kapadia, was not just that Strings had themselves produced and shaped the music of *Coke Studio* between 2013 and 2017, but also now getting a chance to work with next-gen artists like rap duo Young Stunners and producer-singer Abdullah Siddiqui. "It excited me, it was something out of my comfort zone, collaborating with rappers," Kapadia says. It led to "Phir Milenge" featuring Young Stunners, with Xulfi and Siddiqui taking on production roles for *Coke Studio*. Currently, the song stands at over 10 million streams on Spotify and 19 million views on YouTube.

Even when Strings were coexisting alongside the new alternative movement of hip-hop and pop in Pakistan, Kapadia admits that they were "in our own zone" as artists and only dived deep into the newer artists and musical styles ruling streaming platforms after working on "Phir Milenge." He says the project sparked a burning desire to make music again, but not to be relevant as an old-timer.

It led to his debut solo album *Zindagi Jahaan Le Jaaye*, which released in February this year and showcased a slick synth-pop sound. Kapadia says, "I was just speaking from my heart. Strings was a journey of Bilal and I together, and this [solo album] is completely my journey."

In an interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Kapadia speaks about what prompted the sonic direction of *Zindagi Jahaan Le Jaaye*, changing times, a potential collaboration with Ankur Tewari, Karsh Kale and Bangal artist Arnob and liking Indian artists Anuv Jain, The Yellow Diary. Excerpts:

***Rolling Stone India*: When you began working on your solo album after calling time on Strings, was there a moment where you felt like you were getting back to making music and all its processes—like even marketing—sooner than you expected?**

Faisal Kapadia: Absolutely. Of course, the music scene has changed a lot. Even how you make music. When we started, we had to be four or five band members together on bass, guitars on keys and drums and that's how we used to record music. Nowadays, it's more producer-driven music where one guy produces the whole song, more or less.

Marketing and distribution has changed, completely. You had to have a label company at that time, otherwise your album will not reach to any stores like Planet M and Rhythm House. Those were the big stores where people used to buy music, and now music is free and in large abundance. I've heard that Spotify uploads 100,000 songs every day, which means 3 million songs a month. Man, like, wow.

Someone from the new generation, if they even asked me, 'Can you guide us through this [music industry]? What should we do?' I tell them, 'I need your guidance because what we used to do... things have changed.'

Now people are more reliant on social media, which a person like me was never into. We are coming from an era where we used to shy away from things, we're not open to talk about everything we're doing in our lives, so it's different.

But then again, it's a new journey. So I'm taking it completely as a brand new journey because the last journey was with Strings... that was Strings. And now it's me, so I'm not trying to take any advantage of my past and just trying to do things as a newcomer and just exploring. I've just dived into the ocean and now I'm just swimming wherever the wind takes me.

What prompted the synth-pop direction you've taken on *Zindagi Jahaan Le Jaaye*?

This is the music I listen to, which is on my playlist every day. Of course, there are some amazing rock bands and yesterday's alternative rock bands, which I like. But what I'm listening to these days, it's all synth-pop. And usually, if you see what is in the mainstream, it's all synth-pop albums and music.

Composition-wise, yes, my music does have a feel of a bit of retro because that's what I am.

I am not a 19-year-old guy. My voice, it's not a youthful voice. So it will take you back to that Strings era where you used to listen to *Dhaani* or *Duur*. There will be some kind of resemblance.

Now this journey I'm on is at a time when I don't have much to take from this world, and I am not looking for any rewards, I'm not looking for any destination. I just want to enjoy the process. I just want to enjoy the journey, it's fun for me. I want this journey to just go on without reaching any destination.

There's a song on this album called "La Takhoun" with Krystel Dib that's very different, though. How did that one come about?

My plan was to just make one song. That was 'Jaadu.' It was itching me that okay, I want to do one song, at least after Strings. Then I took a break, in the sense that I just wanted to explore the world.

I took up at this camp in Poland, which had a lot of European musicians and from around the world, they were coming and they were staying in a camp for 10 days. So I enrolled myself as a participant and I said, 'I'm gonna go there and I'm gonna learn, and see what's happening in the world of music.'

There were different music courses, like Hungarian music and Bulgarian music, Italian, Spanish, and there was also a course on Arabic music. I said, 'Okay, I'm gonna enroll for Arabic class because Arabic scales are very much similar to our Indian classical scale.' And Krystel was teaching that course.

So I met Krystel there and she found out... initially, I did not disclose that I'm a professional musician but towards the end of the course, we met and we spoke. You know how when musicians meet, the first thing that comes up is 'Oh, let's do something together.' That's how we started. Then after the camp, Krystel called me one day and said she's in Dubai.

At that time, there was no plan of the album. We met, we sat at the piano and we just started coming up with some melodies and all and that's how it happened.

Now that the album has been out for a while and there's been a response. Are there plans to write more or perhaps take it to different parts of the world?

My next move is going to be to make a few videos out of the album. I wanted to release the album without any music video, because, again, I was going for a very old-school thing that, 'Okay, let the album be out, let people I know.'

So probably in five, six months, I will release five to six songs. Then again, I think as a hitchhiker or banjara, in our language, I'll just seek for new music and what comes to me, what inspires me there is nothing on my mind that I want to collaborate with this person or this person. Wherever life takes me.

"I'M NOT TRYING TO TAKE ANY ADVANTAGE OF MY PAST AND JUST TRYING TO DO THINGS AS A NEWCOMER AND JUST EXPLORING."

There was a photo of you with Indian artists like Ankur Tewari, Karsh Kale and Bangladesh's Shayan Chowdhury Arnob all hanging out. What can you tell me about that?

We were planning to work on a song, to collaborate. We all met in Dubai and Ankur and I go a long way back. I've known him since the past, almost 20 years. Karsh, I've been a huge admirer of his work and his music. And then Arnob, he's a pop star.

We all met in Dubai, we got hold of Rahman *saab*'s Firdaus Studio, and we just jammed for three-four days, just got to know each other a bit more. Hopefully, we will be doing something more. We were we were talking, we have a WhatsApp group. Ankur was saying there is a great place in Thailand, which has a studio and is on the beach and 'let's go there.' We're just still planning that this year, we all have to meet and go in the studio and record something.

You got to interact with The Yellow Diary as part of promo for this album. Have there any more Indian artists you've been checking out lately?

The Yellow Diary, their music is really amazing. I recently went to an Anuv Jain concert and I really enjoyed it. I met him after the show and told him it's amazing how one person on an acoustic guitar can pull off a great show.

I really like Prateek Kuhad and apart from that, there are so many amazing musicians – The Western Ghats, Vismay Patel, Twin Strings, Dream Note, Abhilasha Sinha and Hanita Bhambri. So, these days you have so many amazing musicians and different sounds. I think the more that music has been produced, consumption has also increased.

We're also seeing in the hip-hop space that Indian and Pakistani artists are collaborating with each other, there's mutual respect and it reminds one of the time when it was that way with Strings as well. It didn't matter which side of the border you were on.

I absolutely agree with you. It has come back in the same way. When we used to be there, we used to perform with Euphoria and Indian Ocean. Our first collaboration was with [singer] Sagarika for [music channel] Channel [V], called 'Pal.'

Of course, borders have been different, but that mutual respect and friendship was always there. In the middle, early 2010-2011. I saw that missing a bit because not much exchange was happening. In our times, you had to release through an Indian label company to be present in India. That somehow kind of stopped in 2010-11 and nothing was getting released officially anywhere. But now, I think with digital streaming and Spotify and YouTube, you don't need a label to be present in India.

Still label companies are working with Pakistani artists, which is there. But physically, you don't have to release it through anybody. You can just be viral without them too.

The collaborations are happening again, between Pakistanis and Indian musicians and singers and that is amazing. That is so good to see. Thank God that the new generation is also respecting each other. They are also going through that process that okay, Pakistan and India, whatever their histories are, we can be friends and we can work together.

Arjun Kanungo

HAS A GRAND PLAN

The pop star is navigating entrepreneurship in music and tech with his company One Mind and realizes he thrives best in the pop space

By ANURAG TAGAT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARJUN MARK

ARJUN KANUNGO is working all the time. He's seated on a hotel bed in Tokyo in a black tank top and talking about how he wants to just hang out and party in Japan, but he just ends up working. It's well into the evening in the Land of the Rising Sun, and Kanungo is not winding down just yet.

"I'm actually at a shoot. We're in a hotel room, so I'm not home yet," he chuckles. If there's a tinge of tiredness, Kanungo, 34, does well to hide it. Or, he's just genuinely excited to be making inroads into Japan's music and technology industry in recent times—where his album *Industry2* (released in August 2023) had the song "India To Japan" with Japanese rapper Cyber Rui, a more authentic output came almost a year later, with "Tell Me" releasing in February this year.

“When I was trying to expand my horizons as an artist, I made the wrong choice of expanding horizontally. What I should have done was go deeper into what I already know.”

On the plaintive J-pop song, you hear Kanungo’s collaborator, Japanese artist Ren’s voice first, taking on a pop croon in Japanese and English. Kanungo steps in just a bit later and “Tell Me” flows like a late-night piano ballad, written by acclaimed and globe-trotting songwriter Kanata Okajima. She’s written for everyone from BTS to TWICE to Baby Metal, so there’s an earnestness that just pours out of “Tell Me” thanks to Okajima.

The song was written nearly a year ago, but he learned that the hands of the Japanese music industry are meticulous planners. “When we wrote ‘Tell Me’ and finished it in early 2023, Ren had his whole year planned out. His management was clear that this was a song for February 2024,” Kanungo says, with respect in his voice.

On his previous visits, Kanungo has plotted video shoots and songwriting sessions. This time, it’s been more business meetings and investor meetings for his company One Mind—a music company that will now have a Japan headquarters—as well as One Mind Technologies, a tech arm he’s building with India’s top entertainment lawyer Priyanka Khimani and two more co-founders.

“The first cool thing we’re building is a legal tool, like an AI lawyer. We’re building that for the creator economy at the moment. We should have a beta version out as early as June,” Kanungo says. It’s for the Indian audience at first, but they also want it to work in Japan. The artist feels there’s a lot of “information asymmetry” in Japan, and the music industry still needs more organizing than in India.

This is Arjun Kanungo re-establishing himself in the fast-moving world of music, where you can run out of credibility about as quickly as you hit your first few million streams. Kanungo had a crisis of confidence when his album *Industry2* came out. He says, “The mistake that I made was I had too many different types of songs and I put them all into one album.”

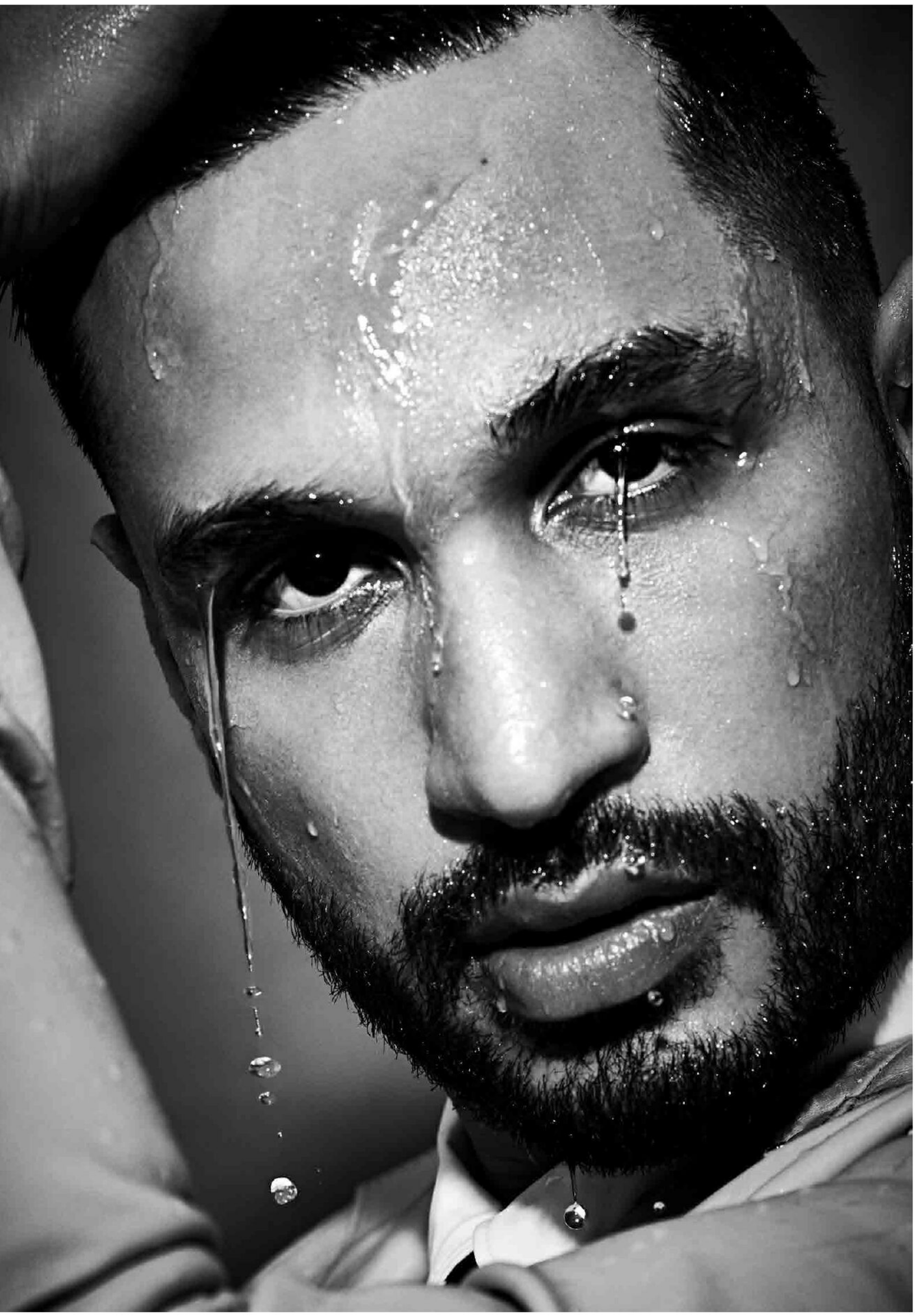
Working on the album while recovering from a hip fracture was also grueling, and it meant that he didn’t get to tour with Industry2 and it didn’t reach people in at least one essential way. Artistically, Kanungo – who has tried everything from funk to hip-hop to rock and electronica – realized that he should stick to pop. “When I was trying to expand my horizons as an artist, I made the wrong choice of expanding horizontally. What I should have done was go deeper into what I already know rather than trying too many things that are not my genre,” he says.

This is coming from the voice who first cut his teeth being part of legendary vocalist Asha Bhosle’s touring act as a vocalist, going around the globe, and then being part of the Indian indie circuit even as he was enlisted by composer duo Sachin-Jigar for the quirky “Khoon Choos Le” from *Go Goa Gone* in 2013. It was only in 2015 that he took a shot at mainstream pop success, releasing “Baaki Baatein Peene Baad” with hip-hop/pop star Badshah via Sony Music India.

After a slew of singles like “Aaya Na Tu” and “La La La” with the backing of major labels and star singers, plus film soundtrack projects, Kanungo released *Industry* in 2022, which had the King-assisted songs “Ilzaam” and “Ishq Samdunar.” Industry2 arrived just a year later, but in a wholly different direction.

At the end of it, Kanungo is glad that it didn’t take more than one album for course correction, where sometimes artists are five albums into the “rebel without a cause situation that’s not working,” the singer says. He adds, “I think it’s taken a lot of confidence for me to realize that my sh*t was good enough.”

“I’m very interested in doing stuff with the stars of tomorrow, not the stars of yesterday here, because I feel like that’s really the value add in the culture.”



After "Tell Me" with Ren to making in-roads into Japan, Kanungo tapped Sri Lankan artist Chamath Sangeeth, taking his song "Nohithunata" to make his new pop song "Suno Na." It's a no-frills, vocal-centric tune that plays up Kanungo's soft, sometimes high-pitched vocals that he's known for, coupled with appropriately romantic and introspective lyrics written by Murtuza Gadiwala.

It's a calculated move to adapt "Nohithunata." Kanungo points out that the song had topped the Sri Lankan Daily 100 list on Apple Music, and is inching towards a million streams on Spotify. "So we acquired that song to be done in Hindi. I think it's going to be a big one because it's already doing so well in the regional version, and the [Hindi] version has also come out great."

One Mind Music—Kanungo's label which has released "Suno Na"—had its funding secured in May and slowly, the artist began building his team. There are about 20 hires and they've been moving forward gung-ho, as he puts it. "The team is killing it," he says.

The goal is to release about 150 songs this year on One Mind Music, which includes Kanungo's songs (including a new EP) and artists like Ocean Sharma, producer Nesz, pop artist Shivvyy ("He's gonna be the biggest thing in Bollywood playback because his voice is exceptional," Kanungo says) and more.

Kanungo says with a little bit of concern that they're only about 40 songs into the release plan. "I think we're about seven songs behind as per our schedule," he says. The way Kanungo describes it, the One Mind office is a creative space, which means that everyone is a bit slower when it comes to "drudge work." He says with a laugh, "Everybody takes it easy once I leave the office. They're like, 'Yeah! Let's party.' Because when I'm there, I'm like, 'Dude, we got to hit the deadlines.' It's the creative side [that] everybody loves, and they really love doing that." The unglamorous and tedious

tasks like syncing lyrics to streaming platforms or adding a Canvas for Spotify tracks can be a downer.

One of Kanungo's favorite memories of Japan is the karaoke bars. It's part of popular culture associated with Japan, as Kanungo knew, but he didn't realize how close the depictions were to real life.

He says, "What you see in movies is literally what you experience. It's usually like these salarymen, who blow off steam. They go to work, and then they really party. They really know how to use this as an emotional outlet. It's incredible to see the broken English. They're singing English songs. It's very entertaining. It's amazing."

When it's Kanungo's turn on the mic, he can blow them away with Bruno Mars' "Uptown Funk" but the singer says it's not a competitive space at all. "It's a very special place to them because they get to blow off steam with their bosses or whoever they come with, and they're not judged. I think it's a very sacred thing for them," he adds.

Kanungo linked up with another Indian Japanophile on this trip – producer Karan Kanchan. They were originally slated to fly into Tokyo together but eventually, they met up and there's a potential collaboration between Kanungo and the beatsmith behind hits like DIVINE's "Baazigar" and more relevantly, his early J-trap sound. "We were just hanging out every day, man. He's just going to Osaka now, so I'm probably not going to see him for the rest of the trip. But every other day, we've been hanging. We've been talking about music, we've been meeting production houses here, talking about songs together," Kanungo says. There's a mutual love for Japan, but Kanungo concedes that Kanchan is the bigger fan of the country. "He's also very into the subcultures as well and really into traditional Japanese music," he adds.

There's a certain reverence that Kanungo also obviously holds for Japan. It started with a fairly touristy visit to the country with his wife – creative designer, actor, and model Carla Dennis. Now, he not only has collaborations lined up with several Japanese artists, but also has a local partner in the country for One Mind Japan, along with liaisons who have helped him get in the same room as renowned brands like Pokémon, major labels, and music companies like TuneCore and Ableton.

Kanungo is leaning in and he's confident that he can be the bridge between India and Japan. Whether intentional or not, on "Tell Me," it's Ren's Japanese vocals that come in first and it's not about an Indian artist hogging the attention but being respectful of what the song needs. "I think when you're writing for Japan, you want to write in Japanese. Obviously, I can't write in Japanese, and they wanted me to sing in Japanese. They wanted the whole song to be Japanese, but I was not confident. I didn't want to mess this up," he says.

His next song brings in Japanese bassist-singer MINA, a 23-year-old artist who's just released her own debut track "Tenjo Tenge Yuiga Dokuson" on May 10th. Kanungo and MINA have worked on a song whose English title is "Tell Me You Love Me." He says, "I've actually made her play a bass line on one of my Hindi songs. She's a slap pop artist, so it's really cool to see a Japanese girl playing a Hindi song."

There are bigger Japanese music stars that he's collaborating with as well, but he's keeping that under wraps since—like with "Tell Me"—the projects would take a while before they're promoted and marketed at the end of the year. What's Kanungo's way to seek out artists? "I've just been binging on Japanese pop culture, man," he says with a laugh. Everybody has been welcoming of him, with mutual excitement levels about working together. He adds, "I'm very interested in doing stuff with the stars of tomorrow, not the stars of yesterday here, because I feel like that's really the value add in the culture."

It all comes out via One Mind, a label that Kanungo says is not just cross-cultural and looks beyond borders but also wants to be consistent. "Our belief is that everything is future forward. Everything from your A&R to your songwriting to your internal process, everything is future forward," he says.

Outside of Japan-focused tunes, Kanungo has a song called "Mahi Ve" with Shivvyy out in mid-May and a couple of songs with Mumbai rapper Gravity coming out in June. Kanungo, who appeared on "Kyu" off Gravity's Moonbounce album, says, "This is my exit from hip-hop, in the sense that I don't want to be a rapper." One Mind Music is also plotting a song with Ocean Sharma as a theme song for "one of the biggest games in India," according to Kanungo.

Timed with the monsoon, there's a pop EP about *baarish* [rains] coming out in July. He says, "I think I'm known for those kind of songs as well. So I was like, 'Why not?'" ®

America's First

Olympic B-Boy

Victor Montalvo set out to be the best breaker in the world. Nobody ever thought that would mean going for gold

By Brandon Sneed

Photographs by Thalía Gochez

VICTOR MONTALVO DRIVES the most yellow vehicle in Los Angeles County, a 1987 Mitsubishi SUV he just purchased off of Craigslist. He pulls through the security gate at a sprawling Santa Monica office compound, parks, and removes a gold chain and ring he bought in India last year. The sunglasses stay on. Just back from Japan, he's jet-lagged as hell. "I swear it's not a hangover," he says, chuckling. "Just feels that way." But alas, he must train.

You'd probably call Montalvo a break dancer; they call themselves "breakers" and what they do "breaking." The breaking world knows Montalvo as "B-Boy Victor" — they're all B-boys and B-girls — and he's one of the best that competitive breaking's ever seen. He's won every major breaking event that's existed, most of them multiple times. When he won the World DanceSport Federation Breaking World Championships last September, that qualified him as the United States' first-ever Olympic breaking representative.

The International Olympic Committee made the announcement in 2020: Breaking would be in the 2024 Paris Olympics, transforming what the sport means to the world and what's possible for its breakers. "It's fucking great," says David "Kid David" Schreibman from Los Angeles, a 35-year-old breaking icon and commentator for Red Bull's BC One competitions. "Because guys like Victor are making a living like I wish I could have.... That was my dream. We never got any of that. We had to be the fucking background dancers for Justin Bieber. Also cool, but not *this* cool."

However, Montalvo will be 30 years old in Paris, the upper limit of breakers' competitive prime. He's concerned. "The kids now are crazy," Montalvo says. "They're like, flying. Incredible stamina. I'm not the same as when I was younger. I'm not as fast, as strong. Maybe more creative. But it's getting tougher."

"Breaking has to be one of the hardest things in the world," Schreibman says. "You need the athleticism of a professional athlete, but you also need to be an artist, and you need to dance. It's like asking Picasso to mountain climb. That's what makes breaking so hard — that element of needing someone who's creative, but also has the highest athletic ability."

Hence the training, jet-lag be damned.

After lunch, Montalvo goes to a state-of-the-art gym with cutting-edge equipment, high ceilings, and walls that open like doors, letting in the beautiful Southern California weather. A trainer appears. The workout begins. He goes for an hour, mostly core work. He does it right. The final exercise requires Montalvo to assume a modified plank position by holding one end of a barbell elevated by a 45-pound plate on it; the other, empty end is secured at floor level. Montalvo rolls the barbell to his right, controlling his body down to a halt parallel with the floor, then he raises himself back up by pulling the barbell back beneath him. He repeats this to his left.

Over the next week, almost every day will see Montalvo train, do interviews and photo shoots, and dance for hours. Many nights end with beers and mezcal shots. He has endless energy, like a soul determined to make full use of its body.

He's also quiet, humble, steady. "I have made it so far from where I started," he says. "Gold is the last possible thing to achieve. And this is probably my only chance."

Thing is, there was a point last year when Montalvo didn't think he'd make the Olympics. "I thought I'd lost it," he says, "wondering, 'Do I still got it?'"

Not long before that, burned out and grieving a sudden loss, Montalvo nearly quit competitive breaking for good. Getting here meant facing that pain again by leaning on lessons imparted by the man whose death he grieved.

Montalvo's path to the Olympics began in 1999, when he was six years old and his father, Victor Sr., and uncle Hector watched the 1984 movie *Beat Street*. Hollywood's first motion picture about breaking, it featured Rock Steady Crew, the world's first professional breaking group; they'd first appeared in the 1982 documentary *Wild Style* and the 1983 film *Flashdance*.

Years prior, in Puebla, Mexico, when Victor Sr. and Hector first saw those movies on Betamax tapes, it was like they were charismatics struck by the Holy Ghost, dropping to the floor to copy the dance moves. They formed a breaking crew, found jams, battled other breakers, and by the mid-Eighties, traveled around Mexico competing and dreaming of winning global competitions in breaking's capital, New York City.

"Gold is the last possible thing to achieve," Montalvo says. "And this is my only chance."

The scene quickly died out in Mexico, however, leaving Victor Sr. and Hector to sate their artistic passions by starting a heavy-metal band. In time they made a new home, near their mother in Kissimmee, Florida, where Victor Sr. worked as a cook.

But now, watching *Beat Street* with his son, he saw the music and dancing do the same thing to his boy it had once done to him, young Victor's eyes glued wide to the screen. "You know," his father said, "I used to do that, too."

Then he did it again. He "mopped the floor" by popping up onto a shoulder with his head on the floor and his legs in the air and scooching along, and did a "windmill," spinning on his back and shoulders with his legs whirling toward the sky. And then he spun on his head. Montalvo remembers watching captivated. "Then I tried to do them," Montalvo recalls, "and I would just fall over. I just, like, threw myself. But I loved it."

Around that time, breaking underwent what one breaker called "a seismic leap" when Red Bull put on its inaugural Lords of the Floor event in 2001. LOTF treated breakers like professional athletes, covering travel costs for crews from all over the world, providing masseuses for dancers between rounds, and handing out $4,000 in prize money, then more than any other event. One breaker at the time said, "[It was] the first time B-boys were treated like rock stars."

By age 10, Montalvo "was obsessed," spending days on end with his cousin in the driveway or bedroom, dancing and spinning on cardboard.

Breaking has four core elements. "Top rock" refers to movements while standing. "Part of top rock" includes footwork — self-explanatory. "Down rock" means moves done on the floor. "Freeze" is any moment when a breaker, well, freezes, usually while holding an unusual position. Down rock is the most crucial element, comprising myriad movements including spins, footwork, transitions, and power moves in which breakers spin their bodies on hands, elbows, shoulders, or their backs or heads. They can appear to defy gravity and the laws of physics, the result of extraordinary athleticism and strength. The most recognizable power move is probably the air flare, in which breakers spin while upside down and balancing on one arm.

The first move Montalvo mastered was the windmill. He remembers the exact moment, in his cousin's bedroom, on a flattened cardboard box, when he got some momentum and launched himself to the floor on his shoulders and sent his legs flying in a circle. "It was the best feeling ever," he says. "Like, 'I got my first move.'"

Victor Sr. built his son a studio in the backyard, cobbling together money for supplies, then doing the labor himself with a friend's help. Montalvo practically lived in it.

One day a teacher handed out paper apples with a question: What do you want to be when you grow up? Montalvo wrote, "The best B-Boy in the world."

IN 2008, when Montalvo was 14, he went to his first major breaking event, Outbreak, in Orlando, organized by the legendary David "MexOne" Alvarado. "I saw so many breakers that were so different and original," Montalvo says. "They just had this dope aura around them."

He began sneaking out at night to go to jams with cousins and friends. "I knew they were sneaking out," Victor Sr. says. "I just didn't say anything. But I thought they were going to friends' houses or

◀ **Breaker Montalvo with his 1987 Mitsubishi SUV**

something. I didn't know sometimes they went to, like, freaking Miami."

Montalvo begged his family for travel money, consumed by the sport. "Once we started going to events and watching people dance, I'm realizing, 'Wow, I'm not that good,'" Montalvo says. "I need to go back and learn what they know. And from there, you start picking people's brains. 'How are you doing this?' 'How do you get this move?' And you just learn the culture, the essence of the dance.... My mind started going 'How did they get this way?' And that's when I got more curious about the culture side of the dance, and the roots of it."

Some researchers put breaking's roots centuries deep, dating back to warriors from the Angola region of Africa who performed similar dance movements as rituals to showcase agility, strength, and solidarity. Its modern evolution began in 1960s New York City, born out of the Bronx's burgeoning hip-hop culture — not as sport but as art, a blend of dancing, gymnastics, and martial arts. People dance-battled to settle conflicts. "Literally, gangs showing up to another gang's party," Schreibman says, "and they would literally dance it out."

They'd throw down with nothing between their skin and the street, art becoming scars. "People would get bald spots on their head," Montalvo says, remembering videos his father showed him as a boy. "It was a pride thing."

Nobody trained. Hell, most didn't even stretch. And as Montalvo entered breaking culture, he found many still did it that way.

"Some people still want to keep it, like, real hip-hop," Montalvo says. "Breaking on concrete. No stretching. No diet. Just get up and drink and smoke and break. And that's how I used to be."

AS A TEENAGER, Montalvo began developing his own style, flowing between air moves and freezes, relying on spontaneity more than choreography. He joined his first crew, the MF Kidz. "We would have these crazy all-day sessions," he says. "We'd get high and just get lost in the moment, and that's when we'd come up with just crazy shit. That's when we'd get most of our signature moves."

The music mattered as much as the dance moves, with the rapper Afrika Bambaataa and R&B-jazz-funk fusion group the Blackbyrds and the Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown, fueling young Montalvo's long days and nights in the studio. He'd feel the music moving his body, often leaving him little say in the matter.

He found his signature move in 2012, at age 17, one he was the first to ever do — the Supa Montalvo: dropping into a crouch on one hand and spinning in 360s, an otherworldly feat of athleticism and strength.

"I didn't know what the fuck I'd just done," Montalvo says. He watched the video footage. "Like, the fuck? I just spun on my one hand three times?"

It was around then that Montalvo won the Red Bull BC One Cypher in Tampa, Florida. That earned him invitations to competitions abroad. To do that, however, and devote more time to professional competition, he would have to quit school.

His mother, Maria Guadalupe Montalvo, and Hector told him he couldn't do it; Victor Sr. argued with them. "They are paying for the freaking plane tickets and the hotel," he reasoned. "I don't have money to give him that. They are going to make it so where he can travel to Europe. What the hell are you talking about he can't do it?"

They had a point: The odds of making a living breaking weren't good. Event winnings alone wouldn't cut it — competitions rarely gave prizes above four figures. Some breakers like Schreibman eked out a living stringing together corporate gigs and Hollywood work. Many took other jobs to pay bills.

"He's going to be a nobody," said Hector.

"You know what?" Victor Sr. said. "Fuck you. It's my son. It's not your freaking son."

Victor Sr. borrowed $500 from his father to get an expedited passport and to give his son some cash while abroad.

Montalvo asked his dad if he was sure this was right. "Hey, if something happens, and you don't make it, then you don't make it," Victor Sr. said. "But follow your fucking dreams."

But the path was fraught. Once, a man claiming to be some sort of manager paid Montalvo's way to El Salvador to judge a competition. "I shouldn't have gone," says Montalvo, who adds that the man ended up trying to manipulate him into giving up opportunities — while doing free work for him. "But it was a free chance to see more of the world."

One trip to London ended as soon as Montalvo deplaned. He called his father in tears. Authorities had detained him in an airport holding cell for immigration-law violations after a misunderstanding over visa requirements. "I was so young, and they were so skeptical," Montalvo says. "They were like, 'Yo, what the hell are you doing coming here? You're only 17. Your parents are letting you come here by yourself?' And I didn't have money.... I was in, like, immigration jail with people who'd been there for months and years."

Montalvo often attended competitions with no way home without prize money. "I never really thought about it," Montalvo says. "I didn't really have a plan. I just loved the movement. The way it made me feel, it was like my own world that I could tap into. I loved always reinventing myself and winning, and never really thought about the money. I just loved the art of it. And the money came naturally."

In 2013, at 18, Montalvo moved to Los Angeles. He stayed in a one-story home on Bundy Lane in Santa Monica, "the Bundy House." It rented for $3,000. Twelve people split it. And the Bundy House, Montalvo says, "was crazy." They all shared one bathroom and shower. And there were always guests. "People would just show up from Japan, Russia, Ukraine," Montalvo says. "Like, 'Yo, we come here to practice.' Just sleeping on couches. But then it was like a whole jam back here. We'd start at midnight and go until, like, noon, smoking, drinking, hanging out, dancing."

They were climbing a mountain as it formed. That year, the World DanceSport Federation held its first breaking world championships, further validating the sport.

Breaking's fan base swelled. Events drew tens of thousands. Gyms filled. Livestreams pulled hundreds of thousands of viewers. Breakers began signing modest sponsorship deals.

After performing admirably, in 2014 Montalvo was invited to join Squadron, a one-of-a-kind bicoastal crew founded by Schreibman and Alvarado. "He's an all-arounder," says Luis "Luigi" Rosada, a 37-year-old Squadron member. "He's really hard to beat. He can flip, power, spin, footwork. He can do it all. He's a perfect recipe for competition."

"There's a level to Victor that's super dangerous," Schreibman says. "His pace. His efficiency with his energy. Compare it to boxing. Victor doesn't do huge knockouts all the time. He's great at jab, jab, jab, jab."

The best competitive breakers find ways to surprise judges and opponents while remaining consistent, requiring a nearly-impossible balance between steady practice to refine and maintain one's abilities, and forever reinventing oneself. "I just don't think there's another competitive breaker who is as consistent and has the full package and can deliver it the way he does," Schreibman says.

But heartbreak conquers all. In 2015, breaking up with a longtime girlfriend left Montalvo feeling lost and depressed. Alvarado helped him course-correct, taking Montalvo to competitions by way of road trips, creating hours of conversation and mentorship.

An undocumented immigrant when he arrived to the States who later acquired his green card, Alvarado built Orlando's breaking culture, grew Outbreak into a global series of significant events, and became one of breaking's most iconic figures. Having grown up in the same area, and then taking him under his wing, nobody influenced Montalvo more. "He was telling me, 'You're going to be winning all of these amazing events, you're going to be winning 20 grand here and 20 grand there,'" Montalvo says. He had his doubts. "That's so much money," he says. "I just didn't see me breaking at that level."

Alvarado argued otherwise. "He's the one who told me what could happen," Montalvo says. "He programmed me with this belief. 'Dog, you've already done it once.' I've beaten these people. 'So you can do it again.' And then everything he said was going to happen came into real life."

Suddenly, Montalvo experienced success the likes of which no breaker ever had. "That year," Rosada says, "he won everything."

The Red Bull BC One America Finals in his home region of Orlando. The inaugural Silverback Open in Philadelphia and the largest single-event prize — $15,000 — in breaking. The Freestyle Session World Finals in California. Then came the Red Bull BC One World Final in Italy, where Montalvo won a world title, becoming what he wrote on that apple when he was 10, the best B-boy in the world.

"Breakers just don't really go on winning streaks like that," says Schreibman. "It's so hard to put together back-to-back wins. But then this kid was winning everything."

"This guy made over 100 grand off jams," Rosada says. "This is the new thing. Vic was one of the first ones to do it.... [Alvarado] saw it with him."

Montalvo gave his championship belt to his father; that made him cry. The belt still hangs in Victor Sr.'s bedroom.

In 2016, Montalvo met Kate Pavlenko, "B-Girl Kate," in New York. An athletic, blue-eyed, brown-haired breaker from Ukraine, she had won a number of regional events and held her own near the top of the ranks worldwide. They bonded over a shared love of jazz and funk music. They grabbed drinks, went dancing, and spent days on end together.

When Pavlenko visited Montalvo in Los Angeles, they escaped the cramped conditions in the house by sleeping in a boat parked in the driveway. Later that year, when Montalvo returned home to Kissimmee to visit family, she went with him. "I loved his heart," she says. Much like Montalvo, Pavlenko speaks with a calm warmth, smiling often and choosing her words carefully. "He is a very kind person, and very easygoing. It felt easy to communicate with him, even though English is not my first language. I thought we were going to have a language barrier, but we didn't."

"He's hard to beat," Rosada says. "He can flip, power, spin, footwork. He can do it all."

In August 2017, Montalvo and Pavlenko went on a road trip with Alvarado from Florida to Tennessee. "We were talking, he was on the phone watching *Superbad,* just laughing like crazy," Montalvo says.

A month later, Montalvo woke up to the news that Alvarado had passed away. Montalvo had just seen his friend a few weeks before — telling me about this loss, he has few words for it, like he still feels the heartbreak. "It was just so shocking," he says, shaking his head.

MONTALVO FINISHED 2017 as the top breaker in the world again, but losing Alvarado hit hard, and competitive breaking's relentless grind got old. "Everyone knows me and knows my moves and what I can do," he recalls. "I used to never practice for competition. I just did it because I loved it. Now I'm practicing for competition instead of just dancing and enjoying. It was getting exhausting."

"It's rough," says Schreibman. "Every other weekend, you're in an arena, and a guy's standing 100 feet away from you, and he's gonna do the same moves you saw last weekend, the music's gonna be the same as the weekend before."

How many times can you become a new you?

Creating further strain: Montalvo had become a full-fledged global celebrity in the breaking world, now with hordes of fans. A 2018 China visit left him disturbed when a group of breaking fans manhandled him as he left an event. "Grabbing me like I was a piece of meat," he says.

Then Covid hit, forcing a break from everything. He went hiking, mountain biking, snowboarding, surfing. He moved back home to Kissimmee, bought a house, and renovated it with his dad and family. Being back home felt good. But he missed Pavlenko, who was locked down in Ukraine. As soon as he could travel, he went there for four months. They traveled Russia together. He trained in muay thai and boxing. He mulled following the well-trod path of breakers past: go Hollywood, work music videos, commercials, movie deals, background dancing gigs, that sort of thing. It was viable.

"I've been doing it for 20 years," he says. "I was definitely just over it ... was like, 'I'm doing the Hollywood thing.'"

Then came news from the International Olympic Committee that breaking would be included in the 2024 Paris Olympics.

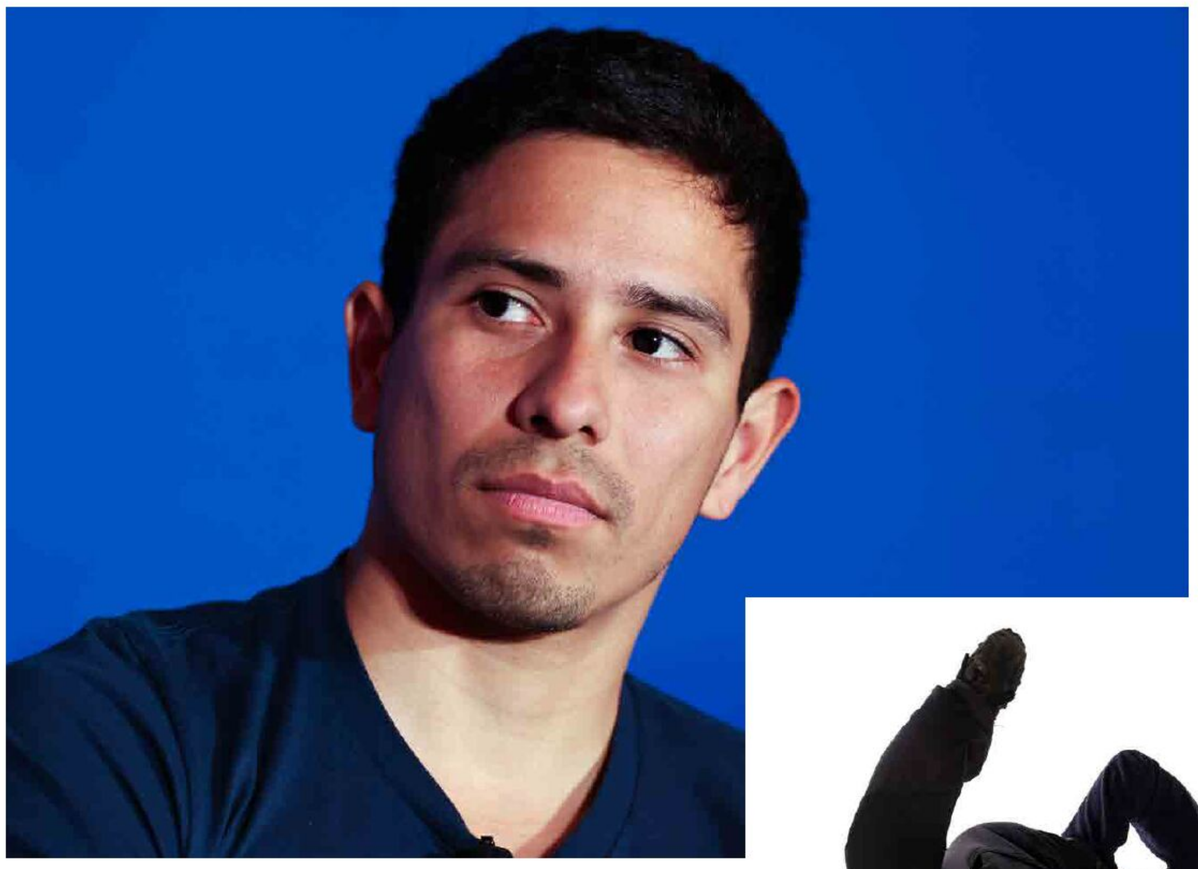
One hell of a plot twist.

"I'd never really watched the Olympics," Montalvo says, "other than 2012, London, watching Usain Bolt."

But he could see it now. The opening ceremonies, the global stage, medals around necks, a gold one around his. Sponsors connected him with Olympians past who shared the pride of representing home and country to the world, and taught him what opportunities awaited after a podium. "That inspired me," Montalvo says. "I said, 'OK, this makes it interesting again.'"

Returning to competition went well enough at first, so well that Montalvo again won the Red Bull BC One World Finals in 2022, claiming another belt. Through the first half of 2023, however, Montalvo entered three separate Olympic-qualifying events, and finished in third place each time. Doubt arose. "I didn't know if I could make it," he says. "I gave myself all this pressure."

Going into the World DanceSport Federation Breaking World Championships in Belgium, one of the last remaining Olympic-qualifying events,



◀ **Montalvo's parents encouraged him to pursue breaking. Victor Sr. grew up breaking in Puebla, Mexico, after watching Betamax tapes of the documentary Wild Style and the movie Flashdance.**

▶ **As a kid, Montalvo would sneak out of his house to attend breaking competitions with friends.**

Montalvo had a near nervous breakdown. Everything felt off.

Montalvo remembered Alvarado. "I told myself what he would've told me," Montalvo says. "'Dog, you won so many countless events, international events. You did it all before. You can do it again.'"

Montalvo and Pavlenko ran to a store to get what he liked — flat, white skater-style Adidas — but they didn't have his size. On their way out of the store, Pavlenko saw a mannequin wearing the shoes Montalvo wanted, but they were a size-and-a-half larger than Montalvo normally wore.

"She forced me to put 'em on," Montalvo says. But when he put on the bigger shoes they felt good. "Ended up being the perfect size."

Montalvo became ... not like his old self, exactly, but a new version, reinvented once again. Maybe he couldn't get high before the competition, but he found that place in his mind, letting go and dropping into the moment, opening his body to go where the music led.

He felt good. This carried him through round after round until the final competition scores were announced, and Montalvo had claimed the title and his spot in this summer's games in Paris.

Montalvo remembered being 10 years old and spending all day in a backyard studio, when the Olympics were never even a thought, a dream beyond a dream.

"I think I've surprised myself," he says. "I'm like, 'Damn, I can't believe I've been able to do this.'"

It will happen at Place de la Concorde on the Champs-Élysées. Montalvo will be one of two B-boys representing the United States through 16 rounds of one-on-one competition over two days. Day One will be a round-robin tournament, by the end of which eight will remain. Day Two will unfold in a seeded tournament format, culminating in breaking's first Olympic medals.

For those who've come before Montalvo, this moment brings mixed emotions.

"I'm low-key kinda jealous," says Rosada. "I've definitely had my bitter moments about it. I put in all this work, and this younger generation is reaping the benefits of it."

Then there's the diluted nature of Olympic competition. It will all be one-on-one, with little reflection of breaking's rich history of crew battles, let alone its origins in hip-hop culture. That's another thing: Public competitions can't use popular hip-hop music without paying expensive licensing fees, and the Olympics won't confirm whether or not they'll splash out for them. There's a chance the competitions will be held using stock beats.

"That's one of the hardest things," Montalvo says. "We fell in love with the dancing because we fell in love with the music. But when we compete we don't have the music we fell in love with, that made us dance at first."

"Some of the heart and soul is gone," Schreibman says. "My fear is that people are going to see a bunch of people onstage dancing to mechanical music and think that's breaking, and that's not what's really awesome about this culture.... That's the counterculture side people don't see unless they go out and see it.

"The hours in the garage with your friends, playing these classic hip-hop records, creating movement that started in your brain and now it's in the world in raw form. That's what makes breaking beautiful."

Montalvo agrees. He invites me to the Bundy House.

I pull up to the curb behind the yellow SUV and meet Montalvo in the driveway. The boat's still right there. Beyond, a gate; beyond that, an open garage. Graffiti covers the garage walls, along with signatures from countless visitors who've passed through. A couch and chairs line the walls; the middle stays clear, covered by padded flooring. Jose "Seize" Rivera spins R&B and funk records and smokes a spliff; he wears a black vest repping the crew he was born into back in the Bronx, the Mighty Zulu Kingz. David "Illy" Bennett, an MF Kidz founding member, now an actor and model who still performs with the L.A. Breakers on Venice Beach, breaks in slow, smooth moves. A dozen other people mingle throughout the garage and backyard, smoking and drinking.

Montalvo has his own place now, including a garage, but he still comes here most days.

He sheds his coat and jewelry and checks the laces on his shoes. Same ones he wore to win worlds and make the Olympics. Then he takes his turn. He eases in with some light footwork and bobbing of the head and shoulders, like a boxer getting loose, then he moves. A windmill. A freeze with his legs in a position akin to a soccer kick. A Supa Montalvo. He stops after a couple of minutes. There's light clapping. A toddler high-fives him.

Soon Pavlenko arrives, wearing baggy gray sweats and a navy hoodie. She pulls her hair back into a ponytail and gets in the mix.

People of all ages flow in and out of the center, moving with the rhythms of the hip-hop tracks thumping through the speakers. The toddler attempts imitation, to moderate success but much fanfare. "That's it right there, baby," Montalvo says. "That's how it starts!"

This goes on for hours. Dancing, drinking, smoking, gassing each other up. It's the breaking version of sandlot baseball, of pickup hoops at the park, of a day at the beach with a board and good break. Then it's time to hit a nearby dive bar for dinner, darts, and pool, and a nine percent Belgian beer called Delirium Tremens, then shots of mezcal.

The next few days with Montalvo unfold in kind. Training, Bundy House breaking, drinks with friends. A quiet happy hour at the Misfit in Santa Monica turns into mezcal-fueled competition at another bar with shuffleboard and Pop-A-Shot and claw machines.

A trip to a club ends with a bouncer refusing entry. Something about dress codes and Victor's oversize breaking pants. We've had enough mezcal that this could become a somewhat dramatic situation; the bouncer seems to sense this, perhaps invite it. Montalvo laughs. We hit another bar. When everyone else calls it a night, Montalvo wants to keep going. We make for Venice, where we close down the Brig.

"You ever get tired?" I ask.

He laughs.

"I am now," he says, but he doesn't mean the night. Every day's a new interview, photo shoot, TV spot to film.

"It's good," he says. "But not really my thing. I'm ready to focus on just dancing again. That's all what it's about. I don't really care about money or people knowing me or things like this. It's about the people, the culture, the dance, you know?

"It's about that garage."

PREVIOUS SPREADS: PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY MARIA ROMERO. LIGHTING TECHNICIAN MIABELLA CHAVEZ. THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES

BECOMING A.C.E

PHOTO COURTESY OF BEAT INTERACTIVE

TAKING IT FROM BUSKING TO COVERING POPULAR DANCE CHOREOGRAPHIES TO THEIR BEGINNINGS TO BECOMING K-POP ARTISTS, AND THEN COMING BACK AFTER A HIATUS, A.C.E'S STORY IS AN INUNDATION OF FOND MEMORIES

***By* DEBASHREE DUTTA**

THE FIRST TIME A.C.E tried their hand at entertaining a crowd was when they were busking in Seoul, creating a space where they could show off their skills and establish a more intimate connection with the audience.

As a busking group, they likely cemented true connections with the public early on, forming a sense of community and sharing experiences well in advance of their renown as K-pop artists. Band member Park Junhee recalls, "I learned so much from performing on the street back then." "I didn't expect to say that we started from the bottom, but that's our story. We started from the bottom!"

Taking it from busking to covering popular dance choreographies to their beginnings to becoming idols, and then coming back after a hiatus, A.C.E's story is an inundation of fond memories. "All of them are precious, but I think it would be busking if I had to choose one," adds Park, while member Lee Donghun states, "I still remember the emotions I had during our first concert. A lot of people came to the concert hall to see A.C.E, and I can't forget the moment when I cried my eyes out."

Adventure Calling Emotions is an acronym for A.C.E's mission to evoke feelings in people that inspire them to pursue desired goals and embark on encounters, opportunities, and thrilling experiences. The whole thing kicked off on May 23, 2017, when A.C.E—Lee Donghun, Park Junhee, WOW, Kim Byeongkwan, and Kang Yuchan—debuted with the single "Cactus." As the quintet gained traction through their gorgeous performances, their sound began to touch listeners worldwide.

In 2019, they were the recipients of the Fan Rising Star Award (The Fact Music Awards) and the Next Artist Award (Soribada Best K-Music Awards). 2020 was their year of victory at the APAN Choice Global Hallyu Star (APAN Music Awards). In 2021, A.C.E partnered with none other than the eminent DJ Steve Aoki for a remix of their hit "Goblin (Favorite Boys)," dubbed "Fav Boyz (Steve Aoki's Gold Star Remix)." The US Billboard World Digital Single Sales Chart pegged the song at number four, while the US Billboard Dance/Electronic Digital Song Sales Chart had it at number 12. Following BTS, Monsta X, and BLACKPINK, A.C.E became the fourth K-pop act in history to earn a spot on the list and also made up the third highest-ranked artist after BTS and BLACKPINK.

Through infectious music and dynamic presentations, A.C.E gained a loyal and dedicated following we know as Choice. From humble beginnings, their ascent to fame embodies the power

"I DIDN'T EXPECT TO SAY WE STARTED FROM THE BOTTOM, BUT THAT'S OUR STORY. WE STARTED FROM THE BOTTOM!"—PARK JUNHEE

of hope and inspiration. The group exemplifies how relentless work and sheer determination may bring goals to fruition and plans to come to pass, even from the ground up.

A.C.E reiterates their allegiance to hard work and passion for music, returning to the scene with their sixth mini album, *My Girl: "My Choice,"* a marker of their commitment to artistic endeavors and how they want to express themselves through meaningful music. This is their first mini album in two and a half years, post-completion of mandatory military service (except for Kang Yuchan, who was serving his military enlistment during the time of production), and they've brought back richer melodies and narratives for their fans.

My Girl: "My Choice," probes the "reasons for existence" through a love story incorporating "Conatus," the very essence and essential power that drives everyone. What's the color of the album? I ask to which WOW promptly responds, "Baby blue (a cool but warm color)." "It's energy and confidence!" "I hope many people will be happy to hear this and embark on their journey," Park Junhee adds.

Its pre-release singles "Effortless" and "Angel" comprise two of the seven tracks on the record. The disco-pop number "My Girl," its lead single, chronicles A.C.E's odyssey of self-discovery, departure, and the pursuit of their purpose in life. Lee Donghun collaborated on "My Girl" with British singer-songwriter Etham, who penned "Effortless," and producer Nickko Young, best known for his accomplishments with Stray Kids, NiziU, and Tomorrow X Together, produced it. WOW's self-written song "Facetime" shares the tale of a boy wanting to Facetime with a girl, revealing his deepest emotions. The album also offers English versions of "Effortless," "My Girl," and "Angel."

My Girl: "My Choice" is A.C.E's exploration of what it feels like—the thoughts and sentiments that describe the process of contemporary people who are searching for their lost identities. The members believe that it will catch on with a wide audience and that its calming melodic quality will offer "comfort and support." That's the whole point of A.C.E—a testament to one's level of tenacity and the capacity for relationship-building via music. Their allure resides in the way they can distill the heart of human emotions into engrossing performances that cut over linguistic and cultural divides. Here's more about that story from my conversation with the band below.

A.C.E seeks to stir up feelings in people that encourage them to take chances and fulfill their dreams. It's easier said than done, right?
Kim Byeongkwan: I think it's very difficult to inspire others. To fit our group name, we always practice hard and give our best through actions rather than words to inspire the fans and the public.

How did you navigate your first release when you dived into K-pop?
Park Junhee: To be honest, I thought I would succeed as soon as I debuted. It was quite a foolish idea. At first, it was not easy to get on a music show, so there were many times when I couldn't perform even though I wanted to after releasing the song. The path of K-pop was a much longer and harder journey than I had expected.

How have time and maturity influenced your music?
WOW: The range of what we can express has become bigger, and we've become more relaxed, which allows us to share more emotions with other people.

What are some of your most experimental songs, in terms of sound, concept, and message?
Lee Donghun: I think it's "Cactus." It was a challenge for us as well, and I think it was very experimental to wear short pants for a hard EDM-style song.
WOW: I think it's our debut song, "Cactus," because it was the first try at the hard EDM genre.

Coming back after a break may seem tough for an artist. Despite your accomplishments, does it, however, feel like you are starting over again?
Kim Byeongkwan: We all had a lot of concerns. We were worried that the hiatus would be too long, and we questioned if we could meet our fans again. Still, I think it's getting more and more exciting as we come back and have a good time with our fans.

What is the most effective way to stay afloat and flourish over the years in K-pop? What should aspiring idols bear in mind?
Park Junhee: I believe that if you steadily make masterpieces, the time will come when people recognize the fruits of your effort!
Lee Donghun: As long as you do the following things—not falling, standing up even if you fall, loving yourself, and improving yourself—I think these help you keep moving forward, so I hope you never give up and continue chasing your dreams.

Could you share with me your thoughts on the band in the years to come, both those aspects that excite and concern you?
WOW: Looking ahead, we'll continue doing a lot of activities. I'm a bit worried about not getting physically injured or tired, but I hope we can control and take care of ourselves so we can work without much worry.

The poster for *My Girl: "My Choice"* looks like a sequence from an office K-drama. I'm curious to know.
Kim Byeongkwan: Originally, we wanted to go with A.C.E's hard concept with a bit of a relaxed and catchy vibe. In that sense, we went with an office story and showed us working in our videos, so it felt like a drama.
Lee Donghun: I think we expressed a romanticized life where we started everything with great aspirations, but the reality isn't going our way, and it's not always easy. However, we never give up and pursue our happiness, adding a romantic touch to the story.

Your message to fans in India
Lee Donghun: If possible, we want to visit our Indian Choices immediately because we miss them so much. Thank you for always loving us. We will try our best to make better music and visit you soon. Don't get sick! Thank you always. I love you!

COUNTRY'S NEW COWBOY ERA

The Red Dirt scene is exploding with stars like Kaitlin Butts, Beyoncé's leading a cowboy-core revolution, and country songwriters are wrangling tough topics like opioids

Kaitlin Butts

The Red Dirt music of Texas and Oklahoma is booming right now. A theater kid from Tulsa wants to bring it to the masses. *By* Marissa R. Moss

Kaitlin Butts is sitting in an East Nashville coffee shop, wondering if she should tell Vince Gill that "Come Rest Your Head (On My Pillow)," their romantic duet from her new album, *Roadrunner!*, was actually inspired by a woman in a funny but slightly crude tank top.

"It had 'cowboy pillows' written across her chest," she says, laughing. Butts had been wandering around after her set at the Two Step Festival in Texas when she spotted the shirt. She jotted down the phrase "cowboy pillows" in her phone, and eventually worked up a tender love song about a woman providing comfort (or a soft place to rest) to a man. She thinks Gill would appreciate the backstory: They're both from Oklahoma and born of a songwriting tradition that, as she puts it, embraces "an unrefined edge" and a little real-life humor.

"It's something I have never been able to put my finger on," Butts says, cross-legged on a

KAITLIN BUTTS

couch, in black leggings and running shoes. "But I can feel an Oklahoma artist when I'm listening to one."

Though she's a new name to many, Butts is establishing herself as one of the most dynamic artists to grow out of the Oklahoma Red Dirt scene, unafraid to test boundaries for which the regional (and male-dominated) subgenre is known. Her 2022 sophomore album found her fiercely fighting for a reclamation of power for her characters and herself, wading through domestic violence, addiction, and family trauma. Since then, she's covered Kesha's "Hunt You Down," released a disco remix of Shania Twain's "That Don't Impress Me Much," made a music video with a drag queen, and created *Roadrunner!,* out this summer, which is a modern redo of Butts' favorite musical, *Oklahoma!*.

Butts may still exude Oklahoma, but she's lived in Nashville since 2019 with her husband, Cleto Cordero, frontman of the Texas-bred band Flatland Cavalry. It's a rare instance when they're both off the road, which means days on the couch and nights at a local lesbian bar for karaoke. *Roadrunner!* lets Butts lean into the theatricality she's always sprinkled into her persona and live show, where the costumes are fringed and her voice fills the room on even the gloomiest songs.

That theatricality, though, is everything the Red Dirt genre isn't typically known for. Generally referring to the songwriting scene that grew out of Stillwater, Oklahoma, in the Seventies and which now encompasses a certain kind of roots, country, and rock amalgam that includes pioneers like Bob Childers and Cross Canadian Ragweed, it's also getting a national platform. Oklahoma boy Zach Bryan sells out stadiums, while bands like Turnpike Troubadours are crossing state lines into the mainstream. "It's cool to see these artists have a bigger moment," says Butts, poised to be next in line.

Dierks Bentley, with whom Butts is touring this summer, agrees. "When I first started out, I spent a lot of time touring with artists in the Red Dirt scene," Bentley says. "They have a spirit and passion for authentic storytelling that rivals anyone out there. Kaitlin fits right in. I love her voice, and her lyrics are raw and honest."

Butts has always checked as many Red Dirt boxes as she's defied. She was born in Tulsa, but didn't grow up listening to country music. She drove a Lexus, not a truck. And she was a supremely gifted musical-theater kid, who went to see a local production of *Oklahoma!* every summer.

"There's so much shared between country and musical theater," Butts says. "There's great songwriting, there's emotion, there's humor, there's witty one-liners. There's murder! All those things have made me the performer I am."

Butts went to Oklahoma City's Academy of Contemporary Music as the only country-focused artist in her class, so the school sent her to gigs in Stillwater. Acclimating herself to the historic scene was a steep learning curve. "I had no idea about the Red Dirt community," she says. She remembers turning to her mother to help fill in the blanks. "She told me about Mike McClure and Randy Crouch and Stoney LaRue."

Butts released her first album, *Same Hell, Different Devil,* in 2015, and then took a seven-year pause before *What Else Can She Do.* The album was heartbreaking and serious, but never without sly humor or theatrical flourish. For the title track's video, which dropped just before legislation aimed at criminalizing drag was proposed in Tennessee, Butts cast drag queen Paris Van Cartier. She wasn't trying to make it political, but she didn't mind if anyone thought that. Butts grew up around the queer community: Her acting and tap teachers were a married gay couple. "It's been normal since I was five years old," she says.

"I think we're in a different age now," Butts adds. "And when someone doesn't believe in the core principles of who I am, which is really that we're all equal human beings, then you can see yourself out the door."

Roadrunner! is sure to widen her platform. While not a song-by-song response to *Oklahoma!,* the album flips the classic tale into one where the women are "liberated and hitting on guys" instead of waiting for their attention. Her version of Kesha's "Hunt You Down" fits right in. Plus, "[Kesha] is so frickin' country," Butts says.

Covering Kesha was also the perfect way to appeal to new crowds. This summer, Butts is playing Lollapalooza, and she's not worried about whether her music stays neatly in a Red Dirt box. Like the soil it's named for, she views the genre as a place to bloom from instead of being endlessly rooted.

"I don't ever want to be the kind of artist where people can nail me down," Butts says. "Red Dirt is where I learned the basics of storytelling. But I want to be unpredictable." ®

RED DIRT: THE NEXT GENERATION

In his 2020 book *Red Dirt: Roots Music Born in Oklahoma, Raised in Texas, at Home Anywhere*, author (and Rolling Stone contributor) Josh Crutchmer pinpoints the 1979 release of Oklahoma musician Bob Childers' debut album as the birth of the Red Dirt movement. Here are four artists stoking the flame that Childers lit.

Dylan Gossett

HOMETOWN Austin

THE BACKSTORY The 25-year-old emerged from nowhere last summer with a pair of bare-bones songs — "To Be Free" and "Coal" — that reminded everyone of the power of a well-written lyric delivered without affectation. He also caught the ear of Miranda Lambert, who signed Gossett as the first artist on her Big Loud Texas imprint. In March, he mesmerized fans at *Rolling Stone*'s Future of Music SXSW showcase and dropped his second EP a week later.

LISTEN UP "Somewhere Between" beefs up Gossett's sound with drums, while he paints a picture of a restless soul's train-hopping journey across the U.S.

Kat Hasty

HOMETOWN San Angelo, Texas

THE BACKSTORY A Lone Star State wanderer, Hasty moved all about West Texas, picking up ideas for her sharp songs along the way. She writes about everything from self-esteem to heartache, killing sacred cows in equal measure. "I'm never gonna be your southern Texas wannabe beauty queen," she snarls in "Pretty Things."

LISTEN UP Hasty's forthcoming single, "The Time of Your Life," is a wicked kiss-off in which she tells her ex, in vivid detail, how she's "kissing boys that I don't like, hanging out with folks that drink all night."

Koe Wetzel

HOMETOWN Pittsburg, Texas

THE BACKSTORY Wetzel's 2016 album, *Noise Complaint,* mixed country with hip-hop and grunge, and promptly made him a cult artist. But don't equate cult with small: The imposing Texan plays to massive crowds throughout the Red Dirt region, drawn to his true tales of drunken escapades and more than one night spent in jail. Expect Wetzel's base to only grow when he drops his latest album, *9 Lives,* in July.

LISTEN UP Wetzel's new single, "Damn Near Normal," is his take on Bob Seger's "Turn the Page," only darker. (But no Wetzel primer is complete without the notorious "February 28, 2016.")

Southall

HOMETOWN Stillwater, Oklahoma

THE BACKSTORY Read Southall and his six-piece band may have come up in the birthplace of Red Dirt — Stillwater, Oklahoma — but that didn't stop them from taking risks with the genre. On last year's self-titled album, they added heavy-metal riffing to their blue-collar anthems about the struggle to stay afloat.

LISTEN UP "Scared Money" is Southall's most straightahead rocker, but try the searing "Out Alive" for a taste of their experimentalism. JOSEPH HUDAK

PREVIOUS SPREAD: THOMAS CRABTREE. THIS PAGE FROM TOP: WILLIAM BASNETT; AXEL MARCENARO; GABE MUNIZ; DALTON LATHAM

Opioids Came for Country Music. It's Fighting Back

With fentanyl and pills flooding communities at the heart of the genre, artists such as Brad Paisley, Elvie Shane, Jaime Wyatt, and others are meeting the crisis in song and in action. *By* Jeff Gage

GETTY IMAGES

DRUGS NEVER SEEMED like a problem to Elvie Shane. Dabbling in cocaine, meth, and heroin were all part of the future country singer's college days in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Even when he got hooked on speed, the dangers didn't seem real.

"We just thought we were having fun and catching a buzz," says Shane. "It wasn't until I started seeing my friends drop like flies that I realized we were playing with fire."

That was before the opioid crisis ravaged Shane's home state of Kentucky and small towns across the U.S., like the one where he grew up: Caneyville, population just more than 500. "Hard drugs were a big-city problem," Shane recalls. "The word 'overdose' was very, very rare."

Today, drug overdoses kill more than 100,000 people annually in this country, with fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, touted as the leading cause of death for people 18 to 45. Those figures led Shane to come clean about his drug abuse on the 2023 single "Pill," one of three songs from his new album, *Damascus,* that address the crisis.

"Those songs are for the people that have been there," says Shane, who got clean for around a decade before scoring a country Number One with "My Boy" in 2021. "So, if you hear the words in my songs, you know I've fucking been there too."

He's not alone in the country world in opening up about addiction. Grammy-nominated singer Jelly Roll explored his past as a drug user and dealer in songs like "Save Me" and in the Hulu doc of the same name. He's played prisons and recovery centers, and in January, went before Congress in support of anti-fentanyl legislation.

"I was a part of the problem. I am here now, standing as a man that wants to be a part of the solution," Jelly Roll testified. "I was the uneducated man in the kitchen playing chemist with drugs I knew absolutely nothing about, just like these drug dealers are doing right now when they're mixing every drug on the market with fentanyl — and they're killing the people we love."

Brad Paisley saw the impact of the opioid crisis firsthand when he spoke with victims from his home state of West Virginia, where overdose deaths per capita are among the worst in the world. The singer, whose "The Medicine Will" is a blistering takedown of pharmaceutical firms, lays the blame at the feet of drug-company executives.

"They said, 'These people are the perfect people to target with this. They're in pain. They have powered this country with backbreaking labor, and it's drying up; and we're gonna go get 'em because they'll eat this stuff up, and we'll tell 'em it's not addictive,'" Paisley says.

Country artists singing about substance abuse is nothing new. Alcohol is a ubiquitous subject in the genre, and marijuana is frequently celebrated, while amphetamine use is alternately winked at or swept under the rug.

The no-nonsense response to opioids is a unique moment, according to country-music scholar Amanda Marie Martínez, a doctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "The growing demands country stars are making to take legal action against the opioid epidemic is an unparalleled development," she says. "This is heavily attributable to the severity of the crisis, and a testament to the level of devastation it's caused to communities across region, class, and race."

Opioids are a particularly acute problem in communities at the heart of country music. Tennessee's Davidson County was named the second-deadliest metro area in the U.S. for overdoses in a September report, and the state ranks in the top 10 for overdose death rates. West Virginia is worst of all, with more than 75 deaths out of every 100,000 residents.

Jaime Wyatt, who chronicled her journey from addiction to sobriety on albums like 2017's *Felony Blues,* says that like Shane, her way to substance abuse came through pills — in her case painkillers that were prescribed to her then-partner, who worked in construction. "In America, a lot of people come by opiate and heroin addiction honestly," Wyatt says. "Through injuries, through being overprescribed."

The issue of prescription access runs both ways, as Shane can attest. "I literally got on the internet and got a letter from a doctor saying that I needed Adderall," he says. "I never had to touch a single street drug."

Shane briefly started using again after the success of "My Boy." His guilt over losing friends, some of whom he introduced to harder drugs himself, prompted him to write "Pill."

Shane believes it is time for the genre to get more honest with itself and not lean on a favorite lyrical crutch. "I feel like country is usually hiding the real shit by talking about whiskey," he says.

ILLUSTRATION BY **ALICIA TATONE**

Cowboy Core Rides Again

From Beyoncé and a fresh class of 'hat acts' to the runway, Western vibes are everywhere — and being reclaimed by those written out of the story

THE WESTERN REVIVAL is underway. After a decade of bro-country sounds and style, where 808s and baseball caps outnumbered steel guitars and Stetsons, country is looking west for a refresh. Record labels are signing artists like Ian Munsick, Catie Offerman, and Tyler Halverson, who grew up around horses and cattle. Festivals are being held on actual ranches. And stars are stepping out, hats to boots, in fresh-off-the-runway Western wear. Even songwriters who play cowboys on TV, like *Yellowstone*'s Luke Grimes, are dropping country albums.

The pop world is saddling up, too. Post Malone and Lana Del Rey are making country turns, and Bruno Mars is dressing cowboy on Instagram. But it's Beyoncé who is at the fore of the movement, emphasizing the core culture by titling her country album *Act II: Cowboy Carter*. "I did a deeper dive into the history of country music," she said. "It feels good to see how music can unite so many people around the world, while also amplifying the voices of some of the people who have dedicated so much of their lives educating on our musical history."

Yes, a cowboy renaissance is upon us.

According to accessible-fashion brand Boohoo, TikTok videos tagged #cowboy recently hit over a billion streams in a month, while Google searches for "cowboy hat" and "bolo tie" spiked more than 200 percent and 566 percent, respectively, on the day Beyoncé dropped "Texas Hold 'Em" and "16 Carriages."

Halverson, a South Dakota native who makes what he calls "Western Amerijuana" music, says adopting cowboy style is essential to country. "The boots and hat go a long way," he says. "Before we even start singing, you already know a little bit about this person."

Beyoncé used cowboy fashion at the Grammys to telegraph her country pivot, rocking a leather Damier skirt suit from Pharrell William's Western Louis Vuitton collection, a bolo tie, and a crisp white Stetson.

"We noticed it," Stetson's marketing boss Tyler Thoreson says. Immediately, the brand reached out to Beyoncé's stylist and began making custom headwear for the singer. When she asked for a crimson hat, artisans broke the brand's neutral-color rule.

"We don't normally sell a red hat, but for Beyoncé, we made it happen," Thoreson says.

But Beyoncé, who grew up in the rodeo mecca of Houston, is doing more than sparking a fashion trend with her *Cowboy Carter* looks. Her platinum-blond hair, spurs, turquoise, and fringe are helping to course-correct the erasure of Black and brown people in country culture.

Randy Savvy, the leader of the Compton Cowboys, a California community group that introduces inner-city youth to horse culture, says the Western aesthetic is not foreign to Black history, despite how it's been depicted in entertainment.

"What Americans view as cowboys, they think about John Wayne films or the Marlboro Man, but that is only one fraction of what the culture really is," Savvy says. Beyoncé seemingly used the red Marlboro font for one of her *Cowboy Carter* shirts.

"We as Black people, every time we've entered a space, we've turned it up a notch," says Savvy. "In country music, you got Beyoncé now putting that stamp on stuff."

Halverson, for one, welcomes it. "It's expanding horizons," he says, "and getting country music in front of audiences that it normally wouldn't be in front of." ELISE BRISCO

OPIOIDS

Adds Wyatt, "We've got to normalize treatment and therapy, just like you would get your oil changed on your car."

Some artists are working to do just that. Tyler Childers, who wrote about the crisis in his ballad "Nose on the Grindstone," is a driving force behind the Healing Appalachia music festival, a recovery fundraiser in Huntington, West Virginia. The event, co-founded by his manager, Ian Thornton, was established after 26 people overdosed in Huntington in one day in August 2016.

The festival takes place each September — National Recovery Month — and highlights recovery through testimonials, and tutorials for naloxone, a drug used to reverse opioid overdoses. "This is a drive-thru society that's faced with a real public-health crisis," says Dave Lavender, board president of Hope for the Hills, the nonprofit behind Healing Appalachia. "It doesn't have an easy fix."

Paisley is cautiously optimistic. "There's an enormous amount of hope with this issue," he says. "I think that we crested a wave of enabled, 'legal' drug abuse into now something where everyone knows there's this problem."

Shane and Wyatt have both done the work at their shows, uniting with the program End Overdose to teach fans to recognize the signs of an overdose. They advocate for venues to carry Narcan and fentanyl test strips, even for nondrug users.

"What we've learned is that drug users are no longer the expendables," Wyatt says. "It's your nieces, your nephews. It's your family members."

It is a lesson that Shane himself learned a long time ago, and one that he will likely live with for the rest of his life. "People need to recognize that maybe just because you do this shit on weekends, that doesn't necessarily mean you don't have a problem," he says. "It starts like that for a lot of people." ®

MASON POOLE

2000 - 2008

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"The best thing about country music to me is the storytelling," Crockett says.

▲ Crockett's preshow ritual always involves his guitar: "I play acoustic as much as possible. That probably comes from my hobo and street-performer days where we would play all day in New Orleans on the corner or in New York City on the subway, or on the street in Colorado."

▶ In the elevator backstage at the Forum Theatre in Melbourne, Australia, Crockett and his band carry their own gear. He's not shy about doing things on his own — like releasing all 13 of his albums independently. "I've never been on a major label," he says. "In fact, I just keep dodging them."

TOUR DIARY

The Observational Troubadour

Whether on the road in Australia or Nashville, Charley Crockett is always listening for his next song

Photographs by JAMIE WDZIEKONSKI

'All roses!" Charley CROCKETT replies when asked how he's doing. The songwriter says he picked up the phrase on tour after hearing a gas-station attendant use it and is now writing a song with that title. Crockett, a thrilling live performer who can transport country fans to lonesome highways or dusty Western towns with his observational lyrics, is always writing while on the road. His new album, *$10 Cowboy,* released in April, was birthed almost entirely on the go.

"I actually have trouble writing just sitting right at the house. I need to be moving," he says before a gig in Miami. "When I'm on the road, people's stories are just spilling out on the street in front of me, and I'm always wanting to take those pieces."

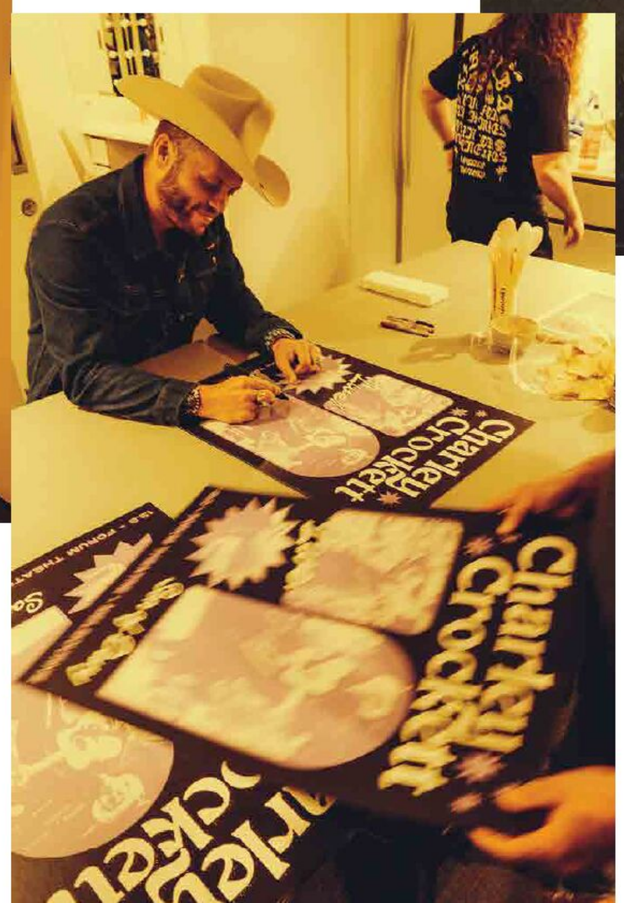
The other day, he overheard a drifter remark, "I'm not done losing yet," and jotted it down. "It's those things that slowly turn into songs and land on records," he says.

Crockett's been prolifically recording albums since returning to his native Texas, in 2015, after years as a street performer. In 2023, he dropped his 12th, *The Man From Waco,* and began selling out rooms like Nashville's Ryman Auditorium and playing for audiences around the globe: RS cameras captured him at a gig in Australia.

"We're having a lot of success outside of the U.S.," Crockett says. "Maybe over the years, the word of mouth has helped me to be able to go [abroad] and sell tickets. I'm happy about that." JOSEPH HUDAK

▲ Backstage after a gig, Crockett typically greets friends and then retires to his bus. "I get out of my wet clothes and get the movies on the satellite," he says. "I like to watch a Western or an old French-language film."

▲ Crockett honed his stage moves as a street performer. "It's not easy to get people's attention," he says. "It's about putting down your inhibitions."



◀ Before the concert, Crockett autographs posters and copies of his albums to sell at the merch table. "I sign probably a couple hundred vinyl a night," he says. "And I spend every dollar that comes in on the show. It's really important to me that people leave my show — no matter what the ticket price is — like, 'Man, I got a deal.'"

▲ Cowboy music is red-hot right now, but Crockett's been writing and recording Western-themed songs for more than a decade. "Authenticity should not be mistaken for amateur realism. Authenticity is hard-won," he says. "I couldn't put out *$10 Cowboy* without all those records that came up before it."

Reviews

Music

DUA LIPA FINDS HER BLISS

The pop megastar follows 'Future Nostalgia' with an LP that searches for a chiller groove

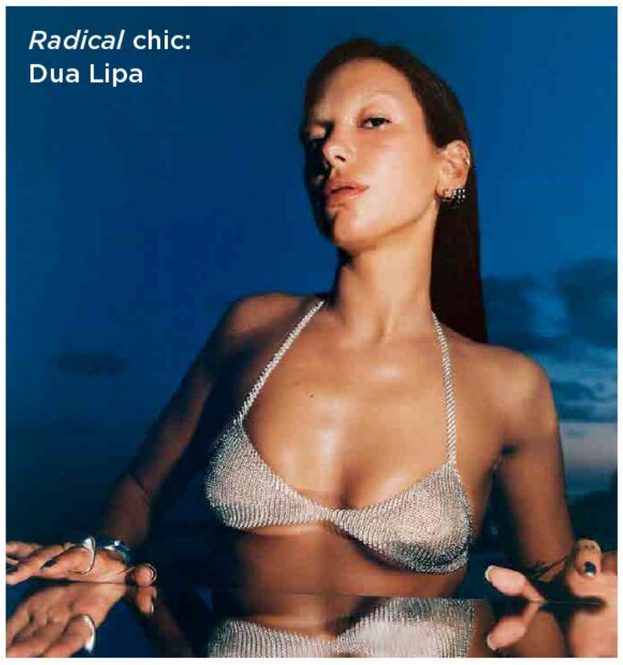
By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

Dua Lipa
Radical Optimism
WARNER

In the video for Dua Lipa's *Barbie* hit, "Dance the Night," an enormous disco ball crashes onto the floor, the bottom half of its mirrors shattering into a million pieces. In an interview, her collaborator Mark Ronson theorized that it signified the end of Lipa's disco era, putting a bow on 2020's now-classic *Future Nostalgia*.

Released during the pandemic, that blockbuster LP turned Lipa into a household name and ushered a disco revival into the pop galaxy. The present was bleak, but *Future Nostalgia* promised one hell of a good time. Four years later, Lipa has finally released her highly-anticipated new album, *Radical Optimism*. The cover art features her out in the ocean, appearing calm ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Nigel Buchanan



Radical chic: Dua Lipa

→ DUA LIPA

despite a looming great white shark. She says the album title refers to "the idea of going through chaos gracefully and feeling like you can weather any storm." While working on it, Lipa listened to Blur, Oasis, and other Brit-pop bands she grew up hearing on the radio. She was so inspired by psychedelia that she enlisted Kevin Parker of Tame Impala, who co-wrote, co-produced, and played on many of the tracks here (among other collaborators).

Turns out Ronson was right, or sort of right. "End of the Era" is a tripped-out dance-pop banger, a party in paradise where Lipa is so giddy in the club she busts out some *la-la-la-la-la*'s. "These Walls" has a gorgeous melody, and whimsical opening lines ("Maybe we should switch careers/'Cause, baby, you know no one beats our poker faces") that will rattle in your head for days — the mark of a true pop professor.

Lipa's voice sounds stronger than ever on *Radical Optimism*. Just listen to the sleek, ABBA-esque single "Training Season" and you can hear these raw, velvety pipes bring a song about mediocre dudes to life. That same voice shines on the closing track, "Happy for You," which sees Lipa ending a relationship on good terms, with nothing but respect for her ex's new relationship. The song aches with maturity and grace, and culminates in happy tears. Lipa has bid farewell to disco, but you can still see a flickering of glitter in these new songs.

Unfortunately, Lipa sometimes sounds so chill that the music loses energy and starts to blur into a blissed-out glaze. Several of the songs on the second half of the record come off like background music, especially compared with potent past highlights like "Physical." Ultimately, what you at times get is a watered-down version of *Future Nostalgia*, a record that feels adrift — even from Lipa herself. We didn't expect her to cover Blur's "Tender," or drop her own line of lava lamps, but we were hoping for something a little more distinct.

Lipa never needed to make "Future Nostalgia Part Two." No one expected her to be trapped in Studio 54 forever. Like any artist, she's bound to evolve and expand her catalog, making records that capture where she's at in life at any given time. But as of right now, it's not entirely clear where she is on *Radical Optimism*. Perhaps that's the point. ®

TYRONE LEBON

MDOU MOCTAR'S GUITAR GLORY

A towering African musician mixes mind-blowing solos and an urgent political message By JON DOLAN

In 2021, Mdou Moctar told Rolling Stone, "My music is going to become more inspired by revolution." That promise was truth in advertising. For more than a decade, the Tuareg guitarist/singer-songwriter, who fronts the band that shares his name, has been staking out a space as a radical guitar innovator as well as a fearless spokesman for his strife-riven homeland of Niger. As he asks in Tuareg on the opening track on his band's excellent new LP, *Funeral for Justice*, "Dear African leaders, hear my burning question/Why does your ear only heed France and America?" His band's swarming attack and his searing solos turn that position-paper directness into a rousing call to arms.

HEAR THIS

Mdou Moctar

Funeral for Justice

MATADOR

Moctar (right) and crew

Moctar has been making his own revolution since he was a kid, fashioning his first guitar in defiance of his strict parents' anti-music edict. On albums like 2019's *Ilana (The Creator)* and the 2021 breakthrough *Afrique Victime*, he and his band combined the earthy, ethereal guitar fire of Tuareg music with Moctar's Stratocaster pyrotechnics, which can plausibly bring to mind Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and his early influence, Eddie Van Halen.

Funeral for Justice is the band's most forceful album yet, tailor-made to melt minds at massive festivals. "Imouhar" opens with rippling guitars and call-and-response, rendered with a low-fi distance, before the sound becomes brighter and bigger, and rhythm guitarist Ahmoudou Madassane, drummer Souleymane Ibrahim, and bassist Mikey Coltun provide a charging, circular backing for Moctar's clarion shredding. "Tchinta" opens with Moctar's voice echoing like a herald over a chasm of prescient distortion, before the band takes off at a gallop. "Sousoume Tamacheq" starts with dense feedback worthy of Sonic Youth, then bursts into overdrive, with Moctar's guitar pushing out dense clusters of frenetic notes over the band's relentless precision.

Funeral for Justice is full of anti-colonial and anti-corruption declarations; "France's actions are frequently veiled in cruelty/We are better off without its turbulent relation," Moctar offers on "Oh France," which manages to feel sprawling yet dramatically urgent. "Imajighen" is a call for African solidarity that fittingly stays closer to home musically in its acoustic desert-blues beauty. "Modern Slaves" closes the set with a plea; after mostly blasting away for the entire album, the band locks into a steely yet somber, mainly acoustic groove as it demands answers from the global powers that be: "Oh, world, why be so selective about human beings/My people are crying while you laugh," with Moctar's voice — and his ax — lighting us toward a freer tomorrow. ®

FROM TOP: WH MOUSTAPHA; LAUREN HARRIS

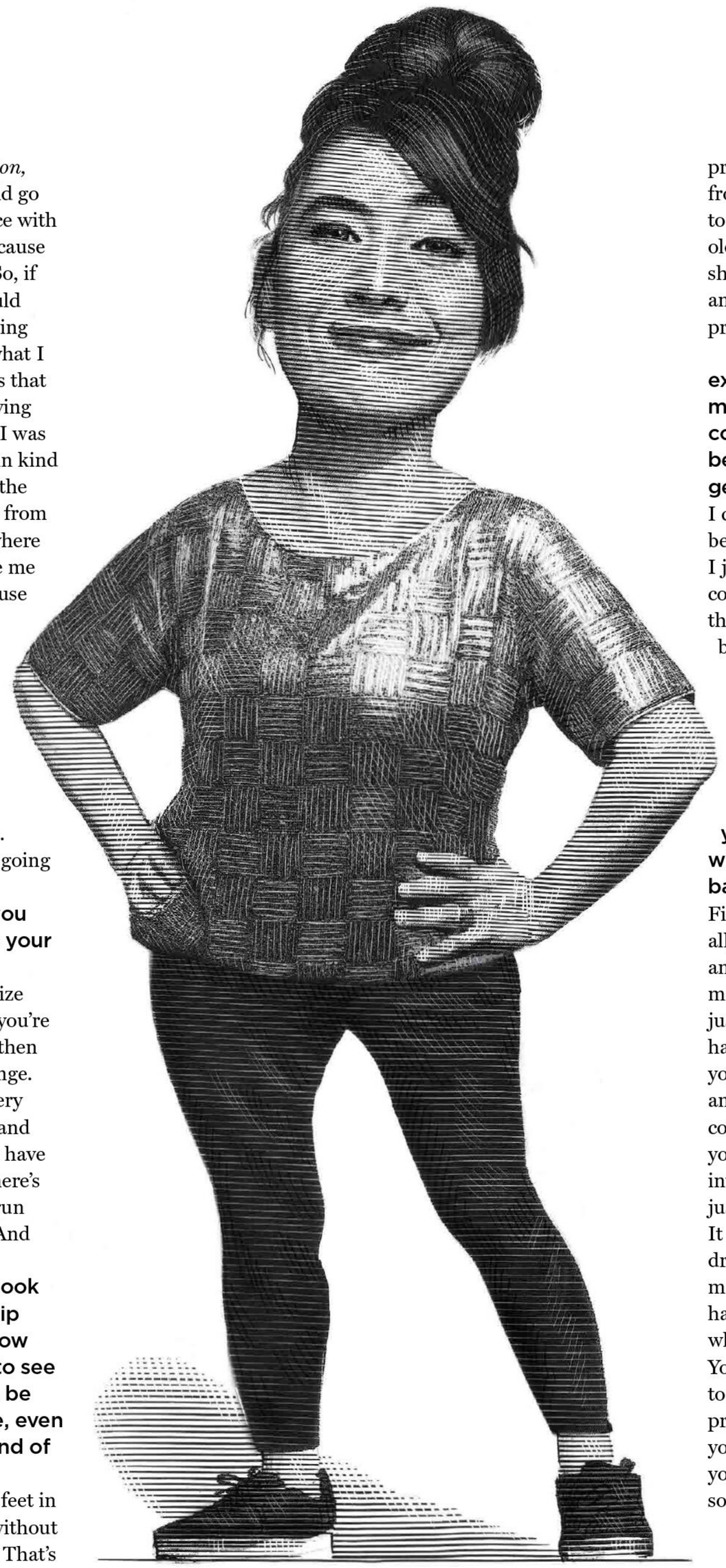
BREAKING

Rachel Chinouriri's Real-Talk Alt-Pop

RACHEL CHINOURIRI, a London-based artist of Zimbabwean descent, made waves in 2022 with "All I Ever Asked," a catchy indie-pop tune that dresses down a disappointing romantic partner. On her debut, *What a Devastating Turn of Events*, her songs are sharply observed and unsparingly real — whether she's cataloging her own relationship snafus in "Dumb-Bitch Juice" or fighting against oppressive beauty standards on "I Hate Myself." Set to music that ranges from bracing alt-rock to rainy-day folk to brisk bedroom pop, it makes for a rich, introspective tapestry. J.D.

Kathleen Hanna

The punk icon on her memoir, Lyme disease, and Kurt Cobain



When did you decide to write a memoir?
I started five or six years ago. I was at this transitional point in my life — it was before Bikini Kill and Le Tigre started playing again — and I wasn't really sure what I was going to do next. I felt like I had to just write everything down that had happened, for myself, so I could move on to the next step. I needed to leave the Nineties behind.

Kathleen Hanna's memoir, 'Rebel Girl,' is out May 14 via Ecco.

You're so vulnerable and open in the book, particularly about the times you were sexually assaulted. Are you nervous about all that being out there?
Not really. It's not my problem. The people who did those things to me, they can have it now. I'm not going to hold their secrets for them anymore. I'm 55, and up until last year, I was taking responsibility for many of the sexual assaults I've experienced. It was my way to say I had agency. It wasn't about me feeling shitty about myself, it was more "Well, if I did this or that or this or that different, then this or that wouldn't have happened."

In the book, you write about your struggle with Lyme disease, and how you discovered that you had it since you were a kid.
I was a professional patient for many years, and I had a notebook that I would keep all of my lab tests in — like Tracy Flick from *Election*, but as a patient. I would go into every doctor's office with a written summary, because my memory was bad. So, if I had a good day, I would spend that day organizing my stuff. And part of what I started discovering was that I had actually been having Lyme symptoms since I was a child. There's a certain kind that I have that's from the East Coast, specifically from Maryland, and that's where I grew up. And it made me feel a little better, because I was like, "Oh, well, no wonder it got so bad — it was never treated." But I did get the right treatment, and I'm doing really, really well.

That's great.
I can tour. It's bananas. Who thought that was going to happen?

What advice do you wish you could give your younger self?
Get a therapist. Prioritize your mental health. If you're not enjoying your life, then something's got to change. We're only here for a very short amount of time, and you are not put here to have a shitty, sucky life. If there's things that you enjoy, run towards those things. And have a lot of sex.

You write in the book about your friendship with Kurt Cobain. How has it been for you to see Nirvana continue to be such a cultural force, even 30 years after the end of the band?
You cannot walk three feet in any country, any city, without seeing a Nirvana shirt. That's pretty amazing for two guys from Aberdeen [Washington] to do that. I see 80-year-old women wearing Nirvana shirts; I see them everywhere, and it makes me smile. I feel proud of them.

It must be very exciting to see art that meant something to you continue to be meaningful to generations of people.
I can't really listen to them because I get really sad, and I just really wish that Kurt could have enjoyed it. And that's the hard part — just being like, wow, I wish that he would've seen us live past the stupid Nineties "you're a sellout" thing. I wish he could just still be here, and making stuff.

What advice would you give to a girl who wanted to start a band now?
Find a friend that you really enjoy spending time with and ask them if they want to make music with you. Then just start with whatever you have. If you have a piano, your band is you, your friend, and the piano. If you have a computer with GarageBand, you can clap your hands into GarageBand, and then just sing over the clapping. It doesn't have to be guitar, drums, bass, keyboard, or manufactured beats. You don't have to be a genius. Make what you feel like making. Your first 20 songs are going to suck, but that's part of the process. You have to make your first shitty songs so that you can make your first good song, that you're like, "Oh, this is it. This is my first good song." ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

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